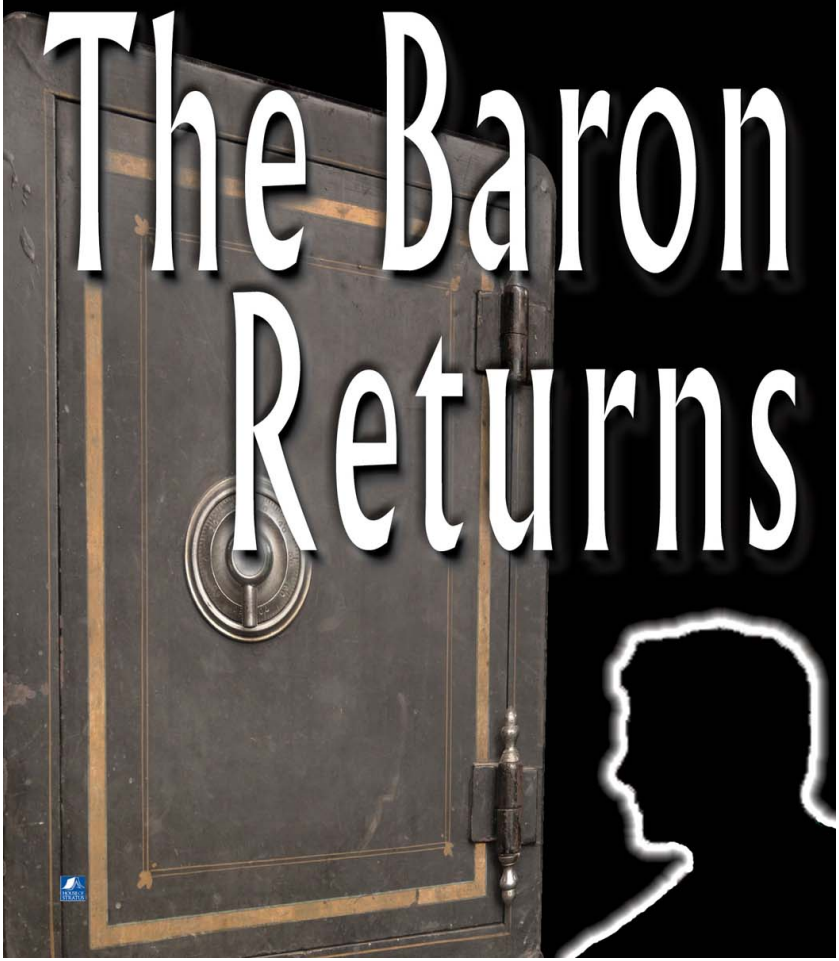
JOHN CREASEY

writing as Anthony Morton

The Baron Returns



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The Baron Returns

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About the Author

John Creasey – Master Storyteller - was born in Surrey, England in 1908 into a poor family in which there were nine children, John Creasey grew up to be a true master story teller and international sensation. His more than 600 crime, mystery and thriller titles have now sold 80 million copies in 25 languages. These include many popular series such as *Gideon of Scotland Yard, The Toff, Dr Palfrey and The Baron*.

Creasey wrote under many pseudonyms, explaining that booksellers had complained he totally dominated the 'C' section in stores. They included:

> *Gordon Ashe, M E Cooke, Norman Deane, Robert Caine Frazer, Patrick Gill, Michael Halliday, Charles Hogarth, Brian Hope, Colin Hughes, Kyle Hunt, Abel Mann, Peter Manton, J J Marric, Richard Martin, Rodney Mattheson, Anthony Morton and Jeremy York.*

Never one to sit still, Creasey had a strong social conscience, and stood for Parliament several times, along with founding the *One Party Alliance* which promoted the idea of government by a coalition of the best minds from across the political spectrum.

He also founded the *British Crime Writers' Association*, which to this day celebrates outstanding crime writing. *The Mystery Writers of America* bestowed upon him the *Edgar Award* for best novel and then in 1969 the ultimate *Grand Master Award*. John Creasey's stories are as compelling today as ever.

Chapter One

THE BARON BREAKS IN

The only sound breaking the stillness of the room was the heavy breathing of the sleeper; the only light was an occasional gleam from a watery moon. The darkness grew impenetrable as the clouds gathered, and a wind came unexpectedly from the north, whistling and wailing through the leafy branches of the beeches near the north wall.

The man waiting beneath the shadows of the trees shivered in the sudden keenness of the wind. He eyed the lighted window of the top floor room impatiently.

It was characteristic of the Baron that he should know the top floor of the house was occupied by servants, and that the owner, a Mr. Augustus Teevens, was in the room immediately beneath the lighted window. It was as typical that, despite the urge to start climbing to the window, the Baron should wait for at least twenty minutes after the light had gone out, and spend those twenty minutes debating with himself whether or not the wind was an advantage.

It made his fingers cold and stiff; that was on the debit side. On the credit side, the branches of the trees creaked as they swayed, the leaves rustled like the pattering of heavy rain, so that any sound he made would be drowned; even the night-watchman's dogs would not be able to hear him.

The Baron had a habit of smiling when working, but it did not necessarily mean that he was happy, more likely that his thoughts were fast but conflicting. He believed the home of Gus Teevens would prove a more difficult proposition than he had anticipated, which had provoked him. Somehow the Baron (who was well known by Gus Teevens as John Mannering, Mayfair bachelor and man about town) had not expected that big pasty-faced stockbroker to guard his valuables so carefully. Teevens had never hinted at such precautions, which served to prove that he was an extremely careful man. Teevens had no idea that Mannering was the Baron, the cracksman whose exploits often hit the headlines, and whose audacity and luck had made the police despair of catching him. The Baron was a legend, an almost fantastic figure about whom an aura of glamour and romance had spread during the past twelve months.

Mannering glanced at the illuminated dial of his watch, seeing that there were thirty seconds to go before the waiting interval was exhausted. His smile was more tense as he pulled the blue silk handkerchief that had been tied loosely round his neck, over his mouth and chin. He slipped his opera-hat into a large pocket of his overcoat and took the coat off; coats and opera-hats were hardly the ideal clothing for climbing trees and scaling walls, but he would need them later. The respectability of a man in evening dress at the wheel of a car was one of the things rarely questioned by the

police even after a night alarm.

A gust of wind came shrieking through the branches as Mannering snapped his fingers, a gesture that had become a habit when he was starting a job, and stretched up towards the first hand-hold on the tree-trunk. The beech-trees, with their low branches and gnarled trunks, made climbing easy.

As he hauled himself up towards the first branch without a false move, an almost inexplicable transformation came over Mannering. Despite the oddness of his appearance in the grounds, he had still been John Mannering, *dilettante* – or so many folk said – connoisseur of more arts than one, and particularly of wine, lover of precious stones, and Society lion, whose photograph so often decorated the pages of the weekly illustrated papers. That was the popular conception of John Mannering. A great deal of it was deliberate pose, even more was thrust upon him, but he certainly lived up to the picture that most of Mayfair and all the gossip columns had of him.

Mannering, not the Baron, had heard that Augustus Teevens had boasted of the value of a diamond necklace recently accepted as payment of a debt. He did not know the debtor, except that she was young and attractive and trusting – and it was said that Teevens was not a man to be trusted. This debt had been incurred while Teevens had handled the debtor's modest investments. Mannering was prepared to believe that most of the investments had been faked, and that Teevens's foreclosure on the necklace was a wicked thing.

It was just the kind of case to interest Mannering as a human being, and his *alter ego* as a cracksman-adventurer, the Baron.

Ever thorough, he had spent a week prospecting the house and grounds, learning in which room Teevens slept, and the location of the servants' bedrooms. Teevens was a bachelor who lived alone, although he did not always sleep in solitary state. Perhaps that was why he kept his safe in his bedroom. Mannering had heard of the night-watchman who patrolled the thirty-acre estate, and of the dogs, which would probably be ferocious if urged on by the watchman, although easily soothed when on their own. Mannering had weighed the pros and cons and decided that the necklace, worth fifty thousand pounds on the retail market, was a prize worthy of the adventure. And Teevens's victim was a charming young thing.

So Mannering had prepared. His respectable-looking black Austin Cambridge was fifty yards from the window, hidden behind a copse, yet there was a straight drive to the road when the job was finished. If luck ran his way five minutes in Teevens's room would be enough to get the diamonds; in ten he could be half a mile on the road to London.

It was the *alter ego,* the Baron, not really John Mannering, who started the climb.

It was a psychological change; everything but the job in hand faded from Mannering's mind. He was here to get the necklace, and his memory only carried him to other houses he had burgled, other jobs as difficult. His senses would warn him of danger if danger was near; his nerves were

trained to take everything calmly and never get flustered in emergency. A lithe, lean daredevil, the Baron had little thought of the past and none at all of the future.

He went up hand over fist to the first bough, tried his weight on it, decided it would stand his thirteen stone, and stretched upright to haul himself to the next branch.

The wind was stronger now he was off the ground, and the tree was swaying about him. Before he went on his eyes, trained to the darkness, calculated the chances of reaching a safer branch below if he should slip.

Teevens's window was high, on the second floor of the house, which was built on a knoll. Mannering had to climb thirty feet through the rustling leaves and branches, but he had marked the spot he wanted from the ground, and he reached it without trouble.

He stopped for a moment, not to get his breath, for he was as fit as an Olympic four-miler, but to reconnoitre. A gleam of silver light from the moon showed him the window, less than twenty feet from where he was standing, five feet from the branch end. Teevens had recently had the trees lopped, and the branch did not taper off; it should be strong enough to carry a man all the way along.

He could hear nothing but the sighing and moaning of the wind and the rustling of the leaves as he peered towards the watchman's box, a wooden shed choc-a-bloc with garden tools and ladders, some fifty yards away. He would have given a great deal for a ladder, but the tree was a good next best thing.

There was no sign of the watchman or the dogs, although he knew the dogs usually waited outside when the watchman was indoors. That meant the man was on his rounds and should be away from this side of the house for fifteen minutes or so.

'Just what I wanted,' thought the Baron, and started the final climb along the bough. Teevens's window was open a few inches at the top, and that promised to make the job quicker and easier. The bough was swaying ominously and as Mannering, now going along monkey-fashion, reached a point five feet from the lopped end, a fierce gust of wind sent him lurching back.

The bough moved no more than six inches, but at that height it seemed two yards. His right foot slipped, for a moment he thought he was off. He hurtled through the branches, but he kept his head, and his fingers tightened round the bough. He tensed himself to take the shock when his weight was thrown on his shoulders.

The jolt was almost enough to tear his arms from their sockets. He winced as he swayed up and down. But the bough steadied, and he was safe, waiting until the stabs of pain had ceased. He started to pull himself up again; he could take any strain he was prepared for without taxing his muscles although he hated to think what would happen if he tore a ligament.

Never mind ligaments! If he stayed here much longer the watchman

would come, and the man carried a .33 revolver.

Mannering exerted every ounce of strength to haul himself up, cocked a knee on the branch, swayed for a moment, brought his second leg up – and was safe! He was breathing hard, mostly from excitement. The narrow escape seemed to offer a challenge, and he was worked up to a pitch of excitement.

The window was still ten feet away, but he wriggled along the branch inch by inch, looking downward for the watchman and straining his ears to catch any sound of the man's approach. The wind was growing more blustery, and some gusts were strong. Who was the fool who'd said a cracksman prayed for a windy night? He would have given the world for silence.

The moon helped again, shining silvery light over the well-kept grounds. No one was in sight. He could see for a hundred yards, and believed he had at least five minutes to work in.

There were six feet now between the swaying branch end where he crouched and the window-ledge, a solid, dependable-looking ledge. He stood up, swaying to keep his balance, with his arms outstretched. Jumping the gap would really be dangerous; he would fall forward, and the length of his body would carry him to the ledge, if once he could get a steady, standing start.

The wind dropped momentarily, and for a moment Mannering was motionless. He drew a deep breath, tensed his muscles and plunged forward.

If he missed his hold it would mean a thirty-foot drop to the hard ground, but he did not give a thought to falling. The ledge loomed nearer. He gripped it with his fingers like a vice, dropped from the bough, and took his weight on his shoulders, prepared this time for the sudden jolt.

But he was home! He hauled himself up on the ledge until he was kneeling, with plenty of room to spare. A glance towards the left showed a clear stretch to the corner of the house, and he thanked his stars for the watchman's slow progress.

The window was comparatively easy to force. Not for the first time the Baron found that the actual entry into a house held no fears. He pulled the bottom half of the window up quickly. It squeaked enough to wake the dead, but he completed the job without pausing. If Teevens stirred now it would be awkward, and speed was of the essence.

He could just see the great bulk of the man, covered with an eiderdown, looking quite mountainous. Teevens's face was turned towards the window and his mouth was gaping. His eyes were closed, which was more important. Mannering climbed through the window and stepped on the floor.

All the precepts of his cracksmanship had gone by the board that night. Normally he entered a house by the ground floor, opening the front doors for a quick method of escape and then sailed into the fray. This time the way back was through the window, offering a poor chance of a getaway. He pulled the window down a little, to prevent the watchman noticing anything when he passed.

There was still no sign of the watchman, the Baron's luck seemed in. He was as lucky by night as John Mannering was reputed to be by day, and felt confident and satisfied as he stepped towards the bed.

His right hand was in his pocket, on the butt of the gas-pistol, which was the only weapon he ever used and which invariably told the police the Baron had been busy.

Teevens was six feet away. His heavy breathing was enough to cover unexpected sounds. The Baron frowned at that realisation. Damn it, the night had been full of the unexpected . . .

Nothing had been so unexpected as the way Gus Teevens moved!

He was up in a flash, grabbing at a gun lying on a table at his bedside. Mannering saw the little eyes open and had hardly time to think. He jumped at the bed in a flash, and crashed his clenched fist into Teevens's mouth.

The fat man dropped back on the pillows with a gasp, his hand moving away from the gun. Mannering hit him again. He had no relish for this side of the job, but it was catch-as-catch-can always, and a moment's soft-heartedness could lead to seven years behind bars. Teevens's head cracked against the wooden panel of the bed. Mannering saw his eyes roll, and was sure that the gas-pistol was not needed. Teevens would be unconscious for ten minutes or so.

Outside the wind was rising, and half-a-dozen times in as many seconds he believed he heard footsteps. But there was no one outside the window when he looked, and no sound came from above.

He swung back into the room, keenly alive to the need for speed. Teevens's foxing had worried him and he was jumpy, but the necklace was somewhere in the room almost within his grasp. He glanced round, saw the two pictures most likely to hide a wall-safe, and found what he wanted directly opposite the window.

He glanced at the safe and told himself it would be comparatively easy to open, a combination mechanism which had once proved a stumbling-block to professionals, but had recently proved quite simple. He turned the handle, listening to the clicking of the tumblers with a practiced ear. Right . . . left . . . right . . . left. It seemed ages as he stood there, yet only seconds passed.

Twice he thought he heard the safe open; twice he was disappointed. But the comparative silence from outside steadied him, and he was absorbed in the task. Teevens was still breathing heavily; he would have a sore head when he woke up.

Ah! The tumblers dropped with a sharper click than usual, and as Mannering pulled at the handle the safe door moved. There would be a second door, of course, but it could be opened easily, and the Baron's work would be done.

He slipped a pick-lock from his waistcoat pocket, and set to work. The thin piece of steel slipped in easily, and he cast round for the lock, his gloved fingers working as dexterously and decisively as ever.

The second lock clicked back, and he chuckled aloud. He did not realise

that his forehead was damp and the palms of his hands wet as he pulled open the second door. There were a dozen things inside, but the case with the diamonds was all he wanted. He slipped it out, prised it open quickly with a screwdriver, and saw the diamonds. Even in the gloom they scintillated up at him.

'Well, you beauties, you'll soon be back on a pretty neck,' murmured the Baron, who sometimes found it helped when he talked to himself. 'A much prettier neck than Teevens's.'

He took the other things out of the safe for a quick inspection. There were odds and ends of jewellery worth a cracksman's attention, and a small bundle of one-pound notes. Mannering pocketed the jewels and most of the wad before closing the safe again.

He had been inside the room just five minutes; it was surprising how many things could happen in a short time. Teevens was still unconscious and would be helpless for another five at least. The difficulties of the job seemed to fade away as the Baron stepped quickly towards the window.

The two things happened at the same moment.

The watchman and his two dogs were almost level with the window, and the man glanced up. The moon, until then a friend to the Baron, broke from the clouds. He stood very clear in its silvery light, and saw the watchman's lips open as the cry of alarm came.

'Hi, there! *Hi!*'

The Baron dodged back out of sight, but as he moved he saw the man level his gun; he was much too quick for the Baron to hope he was dealing with a slow-witted rustic. The explosion came with a devastating suddenness, and the shot rattled against the window, cracking the glass in a dozen places.

The Baron's lips tightened as he swung round towards the door, his only means of escape. As he reached it he heard windows banging on the floor below. Men's voices were raised, and the barking of the dogs, frantic and deep-throated, added to the din.

Chapter Two

HIT AND RUSH

If Mannering had become the Baron when he started to climb the tree, the Baron was yet a different man as he snatched the door of Teevens's room open and entered the passage. Suddenly the situation had become desperate, and the Baron realised it was touch and go. The whole house was roused, and Teevens kept five or six man-servants, more than enough to make the odds seem hopeless.

There was uproar upstairs, questions and answers were being shouted, doors were banging, footsteps thudding on the stairs. The Baron caught a glimpse of a pair of pyjama trousers on the top landing as he started for the hall, two flights below. He was going fast and silently, but the pursuers were stumbling and shouting as they rushed after him.

Mannering jumped five stairs to the next landing, swung round, and started for the last flight. He had no idea what he was going to face, did not know whether the door was barred and bolted or even chained. Too late, he realised what a fool he had been. He had told himself time after time that he would never leave anything to chance again, but he had taken a risk that getting out would be as easy as getting in, and he had lost. He was in as tight a corner as he had ever been in his life.

Then he realised that there was no one on the ground floor and his heart leapt. He ran on towards the hall, then jumped blindly in the dim light; as he landed his heart and stomach seemed to turn upside down.

He landed on a rug, and it slid on the polished floor. His arms went upwards as he tried to keep his balance, but he failed. He thudded down, somehow managing to keep his head clear of the floor, and caught a glimpse of those fluttering white pyjamas. A man was within a couple of yards of him!

The Baron evaded the fatal mistake of getting up in a rush and hoping he could keep his balance. He lay where he was, and the pyjamas leaped downward. The man was only two steps away when he saw the intruder, and the Baron was then on the move, steadier for a few seconds respite.

He grabbed the man's ankle and jerked him down. His own thud had been minor in comparison; the walls seemed to shake as the man's head cracked against the floor. He groaned. The Baron did not think much more trouble was likely from that source, and he had a moment's respite before the other servants were upon him.

Three came in close formation, and one most vital question was answered; none of them was armed. Mannering had no time to get his gas-pistol out, and against three at a time it would have been useless; the only thing he could do was to fight.

The three leaped at him together, in silence. He met the leader with a

right to the nose that sent him staggering, but before he could drive his left into the second man's ribs, a clenched fist caught him on the side of the jaw.

The blow shook him. It also tore that last fragment of caution away from him, and turned him into a fighting machine. He went forward, his eyes blazing even in the gloom, and his opponents seemed to wilt before the fury of the attack. A brutal-looking customer with fists like hams made an effort to flatten him with a steam-hammer blow on the top of the head, but the Baron side-stepped and punched hard at the man's solar plexus. The man gasped and went down.

The Baron was off his balance when the last attacker leaped at him, carrying him down with the force of his rush. They crashed together, with the Baron on top, although he had no idea how he managed to get there. It was no time for niceties, hardly conscious thought. The wind had been knocked out of his opponent, and the Baron banged his head on the polished floor three times; the man groaned and lost consciousness.

The strongest of his opponents was out for a minute or more, but the man with the swollen nose made a half-hearted attempt to stop him with a wild swing. The Baron dodged with almost scornful ease. He countered with a right that rattled the man's teeth and sent him down.

That gave the Baron a moment's respite, but seconds counted now, and he had four to spare before one of the other men could return to the attack. Such a crisis as this proved the value of regular training, but he was breathing hard.

The front door was near, but the night-watchman might be there; the back of the house might be deserted. The Baron knew there was only one flight of stairs, and unless someone slept on the ground floor he should have a chance. But the front door was nearer, and he had decided to go that way when he heard a thudding on the door, followed by the ominous roar of a shot, obviously from a shotgun. Lead rattled against the glass of the window-panels, breaking nothing but making the Baron swing round and race along the passage at the side of the stairs.

It had been easy to get a working knowledge of the house and grounds in his mind, and he knew that he had a straight run to the kitchen exit, providing the doors were unlocked. The first door was ajar, and the key was in the lock.

For the first time since he had been seen, the sinking fear of imminent capture faded. He slammed the door after him and turned the key in the lock, shooting a bolt for added safety. That would keep any pursuers back for several minutes, and the odds were much more even.

The watchman could not be at the back and front. There was still one servant to be accounted for, but he might be away, or looking after the unconscious Teevens. The Baron was sure that once he was in the grounds he could escape, although he might have to leave his hat and coat behind. There were no name tabs in them – he had bought them for nocturnal adventures from a mail-order house – and they would give no clues to the police.

He was in a small morning-room and the next door would lead to a short passage and thence to the kitchen. It would take twenty seconds to reach the kitchen door, thirty to unlock it and pull back the bolts, sixty more to reach the car. The watchman was still battering at the front door, apparently neglecting the back.

Then came the final surprise of that night of surprises, with a staggering unexpectedness that made him gasp. It seemed fantastic.

A *woman's* voice came clearly through the darkness!

'For heaven's sake don't let them catch me!'

For a split second the Baron was paralysed by the unexpectedness of the words and the voice. Then he saw her. She was a slight fair-haired slip of a girl standing at the far end of the passage, and peering at him through the gloom. He could not make out her features, but the anguish in her voice was unmistakable.

'Why don't you say something?' She whispered, her voice was quivering with tension.

The Baron drew a deep breath.

'Don't you belong here?'

'No, I must get away – don't waste time talking!'

Now that she was nearer he could see how attractive she was. The last thing he wanted was company, but the terror in her voice could not be ignored.

'Straight ahead,' he said. The girl said nothing, simply turned and obeyed him blindly, creating a sudden impulse for him to use his torch to see how she moved. If she was slow it would put paid to them both.

She was anything but slow, for she reached the kitchen and the back door well ahead of him. She was fumbling at the bolts as he arrived and turned the key. The door was open less than twenty seconds after that desperate 'don't let them catch me'.

As they ran from the house the fitful moon came out again. The girl turned right on Mannering's whispered direction, and he saw her profile for the first time. The pale light silvered her hair and made it look beautiful. Her profile, touched by the night and the moon and the mystery, was enough to make his heart miss a beat. He had time to marvel at that, then he raced onwards, overtaking her as they reached the corner of the house.

There was little or no sound from behind, even the baying of the dogs was silenced. Mannering was suspicious of the quiet as he caught the girl's right arm, urging her along. She was running easily, and her mouth was closed, so she was in good condition, too.

He tried to forget that, grasping the gas-pistol in his right hand, half expecting what would come next.

The dogs were ahead of them.

Whether the watchman with his gun was near or not the Baron could not tell, but he saw the lean, grey shapes of two Alsatians leaping towards them in the moonlight. He stopped still, pulling the girl's arm and throwing her forward off her balance. She gasped as she stumbled; Mannering muttered

‘Sorry,’ as he saved her from falling, and went on in the same breath, ‘Keep behind me and don’t run. Understand, don’t run!’

Then the first dog sprang at him.

Mannering could see its eyes glinting green, its white teeth and its hanging tongue. He knew the dice was loaded heavily against him; knew there was only one sane thing to do; use his feet.

It was a simple fact that he couldn’t. He let the beast come, shooting out his hands towards a sleek-coated neck. The whole weight of the dog’s body was checked, and Mannering’s left fingers dug into the thick throat. He knew it was impossible to choke it to unconsciousness before the other arrived, but his mind was working fast, and he saw one chance.

He held the brute off with his left hand while he pressed the bulb of the gas-pistol with his right. It was a treble-charged gun, and he could spend the whole of a charge to do the job quickly.

The ether-gas went down the gaping jaws, and the effect was almost instantaneous. After a single yelp the dog went still, dropping from Mannering’s hold to the grass.

But the second brute was on him.

The girl behind him cried out. He told himself that he would always be grateful that she did not scream, for a scream just then would have shattered his nerves.

He staggered as the beast thudded into him, and dodged its snapping jaws more by luck than by judgment. As it dropped back he smashed his fist into the taut neck, heard the brute gulp and knew that it was dazed enough to enable him to reload the pistol.

He saw the long, lean body drop a foot away from its companion. He stood still for twenty seconds, breathing fast, unable to move, He did not realise how much nervous energy had gone in that grim fight; he just felt exhausted.

The girl was by his side now.

‘Are you—are you all right?’

He was glad of her voice, and not because of its attractive huskiness, but because it snapped some energy back into him. The mask was still about his mouth and chin and she could not see his lips move.

‘I’m all right. Thanks. Come on.’

She seemed satisfied with that breathless exhortation, it was almost as though she believed he could get them to safety. He started to run again, heading for the Austin. She was still fleet-footed, with her long hair streaming behind her.

That and a dozen other thoughts flashed through Mannering’s mind, but some questions grew more insistent. Who was she? What had she been doing at Teevens’s house?

The answers could wait; he had less than fifty yards to go to reach the car, and the crisis seemed as good as over. He heard nothing from the house; that was natural, for although it seemed an age not three minutes had passed since he had left the three men in the hall.

Only the missing servant and the watchman mattered, and he hoped that the watchman had forced his way into the house, worrying about Teevens and trusting the dogs to stop the intruder. He . . .

Then a man seemed to rise out of the ground, a gun pointing towards him.

In that second John Mannering felt more afraid than he had ever been in his life, and for the first time the girl at his side uttered a scream. He knew the man would not hesitate to shoot, that the man had been lying in wait all the time.

He touched the trigger as the Baron went the only way left – rugger-fashion, for the man's knees. He had no time to tell the girl what to do, but he prayed that she would have the sense to drop behind him.

For the third time that night the shattering explosion of the shotgun rent the silence; for the second time Mannering missed the shot by inches. Some of the pellets tore through the back of his coat, but he was unscathed.

He grabbed the man's knees and hurled him upward, sending him curving over his shoulders in a backward arc. The man shrieked as his feet left the ground, but the instinct of self-preservation made him twist around so that his shoulder hit the ground first. Had he crashed on his head there could have been only one result – a broken neck. That would be called murder.

As it was the watchman groaned a little before losing consciousness. His gun flew into the air and clattered on to the ground. The second charge went off, but the report was muffled, and the shot sprayed only the grass.

Mannering felt shaken and winded, and his mask was awry. The girl hurried to him, obviously unhurt, and her expression showed her anxiety.

'Are you all right this time?' Her voice was tense now.

'Some questions become almost a habit,' murmured the Baron, and his eyes smiled into hers. 'Give me a hand up, and I'll tell you.'

He needed the helping hand, noting that she pulled at him quite effortlessly. She had unusual strength for a girl. Her expression was still anxious, but his smile, which she could see now with all its charm, eased her mind.

'Thank you, my pet,' said the Baron. 'You're quite a heroine. The din's starting in the house again, though. Towards that beech-tree, I've left a coat there.'

It was an exaggeration to say that the din was starting again, although a window in the house had banged open and a shout echoed across the grounds. They were at the side of the house, and unless the servants came through the windows they had at least a minute's start. That should be enough, for the girl would keep pace.

He was running on his toes and reached the friendly beech five yards ahead of the girl. He bent down as he ran, grabbing his coat, then swerved towards the right, motioning the girl in the same direction. She was tiring, but it would be suicidal to let her relax.

'Follow me – I'll be waiting.' He shouted without pausing to see whether she had heard, reached the car, opened the door and slipped into the driving

seat. By the time the girl arrived the engine was humming and the headlights shedding their white beam ahead. He could tell she was exhausted. Her breath was coming in short gasps, and she staggered as she approached the car, but she had the courage of desperation.

'A car – wonderful.'

'I put it here,' said Mannering as he let in the clutch. The hired Austin moved forward as the girl slammed the door. Soon they were out of the drive that led to Teevens's house, and turning into the main road.

There was no sign of pursuit.

By the time they were half a mile away from the house, the girl was smiling to herself. The more Mannering saw of her the more he realised how attractive she was. Everything was fine, he needn't drive fast for long.

Suddenly he muttered under his breath and glanced at her. His face was set, and it seemed grim and formidable now that he wasn't smiling.

'What's the trouble?' she asked with a flash of anxiety.

'My memory,' said Mannering. 'I forgot to cut the telephone wires. I don't know a surer sign of trouble. Do you?'

Chapter Three

NIGHT ENCOUNTER

Mannering had promised himself that he would soon ask questions, for the girl owed him plenty of explanations, when the realisation of his omission flashed into his mind. Usually his first precaution was to jam the telephone so that no one in the burgled house could get the exchange. In emergency he simply cut the wires, and risked alarming the exchange. It had been urgent enough that night, yet in the rush of the escape from Teevens's house he had forgotten the simple precaution.

Teevens's house was in Hampshire, between Winchester and Basingstoke, and there were a dozen private estates near as well as several villages. Mannering realised most vividly that Teevens's men could summon the Winchester police by phone. In a few minutes warning calls would be going to radio patrols on all local roads – to Reading, Newbury and Andover from north to south, on the west side, and Alton and Alresford on the east. He was encircled. The police could come from any and every direction, at this very moment patrol cars might be on the move.

His best chance of escape was to drive fast towards Winchester, eight miles away. In that direction there was more hope of losing himself and the girl than in any other. Even then there was a real risk of a night encounter with the police.

The girl drew a deep breath when he told her, but nervous tension, or perhaps common sense, prevented her from asking pointless questions. The one she did ask, looking at him steadily and yet with obvious fear, was reasonable.

'What chance do we have?'

Mannering shrugged his shoulders and a glint of the smile came back to his eyes.

'Fifty-fifty – but I like odds better than that. How are you feeling?'

'I shall be all right. But I was nearly exhausted back there.'

'I can believe it,' said Mannering, and he glanced at her. She was smiling, and she looked nice, but there was a suggestion of aloofness about her beauty, almost as if she had not decided whether to accept him. Certainly Mannering found it hard to believe she had been at Teevens's house for any unlawful purpose.

The questions he had been aching to ask went by the board.

'I'll get to Winchester as soon as I can,' he told her. 'Tidy your hair, and look tired, will you? Have you any lipstick?'

'Yes.' She held up a small vanity bag, and Mannering actually chuckled. She had held on to the bag, at all costs.

'Why?' she asked.

'I'm going to stop the car to put on my hat and coat,' he said, 'dab a bit of

lipstick on as if you've smeared it a little. Be liberal with the powder – rouge too, if you've got it.'

She took everything he said for granted, and raised no questions as Mannering pulled into the side. They had been on the road for ten minutes, which meant that if the missing servant had been at the telephone, the police had known of the burglary for a quarter of an hour. At any moment he might see a patrol.

He slipped into his coat and popped the opera-hat open. The girl laughed suddenly. It was good to feel she could laugh just then.

Mannering sat back in the driving seat, and they were moving again when he spoke. The girl had used lipstick, powder and a comb quickly.

'Have you seen what I'm driving at?'

'I've an idea. I—oh!' She broke off, gasping.

'What is it?' asked Mannering, aware of the sudden alarm in her voice.

'Lights,' she said tensely. 'Behind us.'

Mannering glanced into the driving mirror and could see the road behind them clearly. He saw the two white orbs, and knew that there was a fair chance that they belonged to a police patrol car. It was not certain, of course, but this road carried very little traffic at night.

He glanced at the girl. Although her lips were set her eyes were wide open and gleaming. She might be scared of what would happen, but she was calm enough to tackle any emergency.

'You're doing nicely,' he told her. As she turned towards him he saw that she had over-painted her lips and rouged her cheeks just as he had asked. She looked . . .

'Shut your eyes,' he added.

The girl obeyed again, and Mannering's lips twitched. Then he glanced into the mirror again, seeing that the approaching car was catching up with them; and he was doing a steady sixty.

Did it mean pursuit?

When he had told his companion the chances were fifty-fifty he had not reckoned on trouble coming as quickly as this. He waited, the expression in his eyes very hard. The other car's engine was audible now, and the headlights seemed to leap and sway behind them.

He kept the speedometer at sixty, knowing it would justify suspicion if he went faster.

The car, a small M.G., shot past them at sixty-five, and as it passed he caught a glimpse of the peak-capped occupants. He saw it swerve, heard the gong banging, and pulled up quickly, his heart thumping. He stopped within a foot of the police car, and his hand was still on the brake when a patrolman reached the Austin. For sheer speed that policeman could claim full marks. Mannering hoped devoutly that his brains were not as good as his muscles.

He looked up at the man, as if in annoyance. The policeman showed immediate respect for his opera-hat, and saluted.

'I'm sorry to worry you, sir, but . . .'

‘This road,’ said Mannering, affecting a throaty voice that he occasionally used, ‘is not speed controlled, is it?’

The stare, the manner and the opera-hat together seemed to make the policeman wilt, and when he started to speak the girl opened her eyes. Mannering felt her start in feigned surprise. She stared at the constable with mingled insolence and pertness which seemed to strike just the right note.

‘Peter! Who is this man?’

‘Sorry to stop you, sir.’ The constable spoke quickly, in the Hampshire dialect. ‘It wasn’t for speeding. There’s been a burglary near by. I . . .’

Mannering didn’t turn a hair, and the girl’s behaviour was little short of miraculous. She had even invented a name for him.

‘I don’t wonder,’ said Mannering tartly, ‘with so many police on the road. A living disgrace, and I’ve always said so. What are the police for? I ask you that, what . . .’

The youthful patrol-man seemed worried and easy to handle; but the driver might not be so easy. He was approaching now – a stocky, resolute-looking man whose sergeant’s stripes showed in the car lights.

‘All right, Jack,’ he said, and Mannering knew a masterful voice when he heard one. The girl at his side was still looking tired, indignant and reproachful.

‘May I see your licence, sir?’ Mannering was ready for that, and he had a licence in the name of Mr. Mayle in the dashboard pocket. He grumbled, but produced it.

‘Thank you, sir. Insurance, please?’

‘I haven’t got the cover note with me,’ said Mannering, and the sergeant nodded.

‘Has any other vehicle passed you on the road in the last fifteen minutes?’

‘Two or three cars,’ Mannering lied. ‘A Jaguar, a Morris Minor and a Bentley.’

‘Thank you.’ The driver was punctilious, while Mannering had another uneasy thought in his mind. Had anyone at the house seen the girl?

The watchman would not have recovered yet, and in any case these men could have responded only to an early call. If the girl had been seen they were finished, for it would mean enquiries, and he had the diamonds as well as other things in his pocket. But if she had not been seen, he still had a chance, for the police would be looking for a solitary motorist.

‘Were they speeding?’ The sergeant asked.

‘All of them,’ said Mannering as promptly as before. ‘Damned sight too fast.’ He still looked affronted, although he was thawing a little. He disliked the man’s steady gaze, but told himself he would have acted by now had he held any real suspicions.

‘I see,’ said the sergeant. ‘Purely as a formality, sir, will you tell us where you’ve come from?’

Mannering drew a deep breath. Here was the worst, the most ticklish part of the job, and he hardly knew how to answer. If his story was checked he could not prove an alibi.

‘I,’ he began, and his tone was rasping. ‘I . . .’

And then the girl rested a hand on his arm.

‘You’d better tell them,’ she said, and Mannering could have laughed aloud, for there was a catch in her voice as if she was really nervous. ‘They —*they* will be discreet, I’m sure.’

‘We certainly will, miss,’ said the tough-looking sergeant. Mannering, his heart thumping, wondered what her next move would be. The girl had taken control, and she was good. His job for the moment was to be on his dignity.

‘They’ve no right to know!’ he snapped. ‘We’re free citizens, and the country is free to us. Daphne, don’t tell them! I insist!’

His Daphne was as good as her Peter, and the first policeman was beginning to look uncomfortable. The driver stared at Mannering without a change of expression.

‘I’m sorry, sir, but we know the thief is in this neighbourhood, and everyone who is within the radius must explain where they’ve been. It’s purely a matter of routine.’

‘Routine? Routine my . . .’

‘Peter, dear,’ interrupted Daphne, and the pressure of her fingers on Mannering’s arm increased. ‘It can’t be helped. We’ve just come from Lord Rombell’s, sergeant. Mr.—Peter,’ she corrected herself hastily, ‘arranged to meet me at midnight. We . . .’

‘I consider it an outrage,’ stormed Mannering, ‘that private information should be forced from us! I refuse to say another word. Telephone Lord Rombell, if you must.’

The sergeant drew a deep breath. Whether he was suspicious or whether he was annoyed by Mannering’s manner it was impossible to tell, but Mannering was hanging on to his words with a tenseness it was difficult to hide.

‘Thank you, miss.’ The man *was* annoyed with Mannering. ‘If you will give me your name and address . . .’

‘I’m Philippa Grey, and I am staying with Lord Rombell,’ said ‘Daphne’, and the Baron’s heart thumped. ‘Daphne is—Daphne’s the name Peter prefers to use.’

‘I quite understand, Miss Grey,’ said the sergeant with heavy humour. ‘And you, sir?’

‘You have it on the licence, man!’ snapped Mannering in his haughtiest voice. ‘James Peter Mayle of The Grove, Basingstoke. But if a word of this ever leaks out, officer, I warn you there’ll be trouble.’

‘You needn’t be afraid of that, sir.’ The sergeant drew back, and his companion turned away as if with relief. ‘Daphne’ smiled at them both as only she could smile, and Mannering pressed her arm, the only way he could show his appreciation.

‘For an eloping couple,’ said John Mannering, leaning with his back against the wall of his Chelsea flat and smiling at a tired but cheerful ‘Daphne’, ‘I think we did very well. If you hadn’t jumped into the breach as quickly as

you did the Lord knows where we'd be now.'

'In a police cell, probably,' said Philippa Grey in the matter-of-fact tone Mannering had learned to expect from her in the past few hours. 'If it comes to that I should have been in Queer Street if you hadn't acted so—well, acted.'

'Yes. But what will Lord Rombell say?'

It was a point worth considering.

They had reached Winchester twenty minutes after the police car had left them, and they had known that only the mention of Lord Rombell's name had saved them from further questioning. Rombell was a power in that locality, and the police had not cared to take chances.

They had found an all-night café near Winchester, refreshed themselves, and driven to London. One way and the other it had taken them from one o'clock until eight o'clock. Now they were in Mannering's Bloom Street flat, and for the first time Mannering was allowing himself to ask questions.

The more he saw of Philippa, the more he liked her. She was quick-witted, wholesome, something more than pretty, and she had a lively sense of humour – a combination that he had only met once or twice before, particularly in Lorna Fauntley.

Lorna Fauntley and John Mannering were next door to engaged, according to Mayfair rumours. Just how true it was only Mannering and Lorna knew. At the moment Lorna was in the north with Lady Fauntley, and Mannering had not told her of his intention of visiting Gus Teevens.

For the present the girl who called herself Philippa Grey was the only problem. Mannering could not make up his mind just what she was going to do, or just what she had done. If she had used Rombell's name as a shot in the dark, the Baron might have thrown away his Chelsea address, for he would never be able to go there again if the police made inquiries. On the other hand he felt that she did know the peer.

Philippa Grey laughed. It was the first time that Mannering had seen her laugh.

'Jimmy will think me a little fool,' she said. 'He'll be quite sure I *did* meet you by appointment. He'll be sure I *did* plan an elopement. He might even think we spent the night together. You don't blush easily, do you?'

'I've a perfect *sang-froid,'* Mannering assured her.

'I believe you have. Well – that's all right, isn't it?'

'Couldn't be better,' agreed Mannering, and he had not been so relieved for years. 'I didn't dream you'd given your light name.'

The girl's eyes sparkled. '*My* conscience was clear.'

'Touché.' Mannering chuckled. 'Forgive me if I'm dropping a brick, but I don't remember seeing you, and I should have if you're a friend of Jimmy Rombell's. You should know me, too.'

'I knew you the moment the mask came off,' she declared. 'I don't know. John Mannering – the Baron!'

Mannering's smile was tinged with irony.

'So you even guessed the Baron?'

‘The blue mask and the gas-pistol made that easy. But—’ She shook her head and smiled at him. ‘It’s too late to be surprised. I’ve been getting used to the idea since I realised it. Now I suppose you want to know what I was doing at Teevens’s place?’

‘I’m not pressing the point. However . . .’

‘You won’t let me go until you know?’

Mannering had been wondering for most of the journey from Hampshire who she was and what she had been doing at Teevens’s place, and he had not tried to guess. It had even passed through his mind that she had also gone for the diamonds, but she certainly wasn’t the girl whom Teevens had taken them from. That left him with an open mind and a problem complicated by the fact that Philippa Grey was a familiar of Lord Rombell’s, one of the more lively of the modern nobility, and an acquaintance of Mannering’s.

‘I won’t say you can’t go,’ Mannering said slowly. ‘But—’

‘I won’t keep you on tenterhooks any longer,’ Philippa Grey said. ‘I went for Alice Purnall’s necklace. Oh, I know it was mad, but Alice is absolutely desperate! I saw her last night after Teevens had taken the diamonds, and she broke down.’

Philippa Grey was looking straight ahead of her, while the Baron was realising he had been very near the mark. Why on earth should she have taken such a risk for Teevens’s victim?

Philippa went on quickly. ‘Alice and I have been such friends – I might say she’s been my only close friend – and we’re neither of us well off. I do have enough to live on, while she hasn’t. Jimmy Rombell’s place – Jimmy’s my cousin, by the way – is near Teevens’s. I decided to go and see whether it *might* be possible to get it. The beast swindled her, you know. One of the ground floor windows was open so that I could just squeeze through, and I worked up enough courage to go in. Then the din started, and I couldn’t find the room! I was waiting in that passage so scared that I nearly jumped on you. If it hadn’t been for the mask, I would have done.’

‘It isn’t often it works that way,’ said Mannering. The girl became even more conscious of his dark, tanned face, his white teeth, his hazel eyes. She could well understand why he was lionised, but she saw now that he was as level-headed as he was attractive. ‘Forgive me saying it was a damned silly thing to do,’ Mannering went on.

‘I’d begun to realise it,’ admitted Philippa Grey.

‘Try and finish,’ advised Mannering. ‘Of course, some people can get away with it but I assure you it’s more luck than judgment. It’s not a woman’s job by a long way. You were perilously close to being gaoled as my accomplice last night.’

‘Thank you,’ said Philippa Grey. ‘Is the lecture finished?’

‘You’re a good pupil,’ said Mannering. He took a small case from his pocket. ‘I don’t need to say this twice. Apart from ourselves, tonight’s incidents are to be completely forgotten?’

‘Can’t I even boast that I helped the Baron to escape?’

‘You certainly cannot!’

‘All right.’ She was laughing at him, but yawned suddenly. ‘Oh, I’m so tired! I must get to the Elan, and then telephone Jimmy. He’ll have heard from the police by now, and he’ll be anxious. By the way, you won’t tell Alice Purnall about this?’

‘Certainly not,’ said John Mannering. He opened the case suddenly, with a sleight of hand that took her by surprise. ‘But you can give her a present. Or would you prefer me to sell them and give her the proceeds?’

Philippa Grey stared at this blazing necklet of diamonds on the plush of the case. Alice Purnall’s diamonds – Gus Teevens’s diamonds. She didn’t really understand afterwards why it came with such a shock of surprise.

‘You—you *found* them?’

‘You’re talking to the Baron,’ murmured Mannering. ‘There were one or two other things, and we’ll both be rewarded.’

Philippa stared up at him for a moment without speaking. She was sitting back in the easy chair – she was dressed in the evening frock which had helped to persuade the police-sergeant that she had spoken the truth – and had washed off the superfluous rouge and lipstick. Altogether she looked good; Mannering told himself that was the best word for her.

She stood up slowly. ‘You mean me to have these for Alice?’

‘Of course.’ He held out the case to her, and as she took it he could not guess what she was thinking. Then, with a curious kind of considered impulsiveness, she put her arms about him, stretched up, and pressed her lips against his.

‘I’ll always remember it,’ she said, and before he had really recovered she was out of the flat. He heard her hurrying down the stairs.

Mannering stood where he was for a few moments, half frowning. Then he forced a smile.

‘That’s that,’ he said. ‘Now I’ll have to get busy. Bristow will soon be looking round.’

He was thinking of Detective-Superintendent William Bristow – Old Bill at Scotland Yard – who invariably suspected Mannering (or the Baron, for he knew but could not prove the two men were one and the same), and when he learned of the country house burglary would certainly pay this flat a visit. Mannering had an accommodation address – that of Mr. Mayle, the one he had given the Hampshire sergeant – which he could use. The quicker he used it for the other proceeds of the burglary the better.

The money would be safer at the Wimbledon house, so would the trinkets. There were four of them, rings and earrings, worth perhaps five hundred pounds in the only market in which Mannering could dispose of them. He thumbed through the notes, and reached the thirty mark before he found a slip of paper between them. He took the slip out, expecting to find it blank, several words were pencilled on it, and his interest quickened.

The next moment he stood staring at the words. There were three names, which by themselves meant nothing, yet in the light of events might mean a great deal. They were written in Teevens’s sprawling writing:

Purnall. (This was crossed through.)
Didcotte.
Fauntley.

Fauntley!

That was Lord Fauntley without a doubt, and Mannering felt certain this was a list of people whom Teevens meant to victimise. The cancelled name of Alice Purnall made that obvious. Mannering stood staring into space, marvelling at the twist of fate which had made him throw down the gauntlet for Alice Purnall.

Now he was throwing it down for Lorna Fauntley's father. And for Lorna he would do anything in the world.

Chapter Four

BILL BRISTOW'S ADVICE

The discovery of the list of names was more of a shock than Mannering realised, but it did not affect him immediately. He slipped the paper into his wallet, bundled the money and jewels into a parcel, and hurried from the flat. The parcel had to be posted to Wimbledon before the police could find it in his rooms, for he felt sure that Bristow would come.

He had other urgent things to do, and there was no time to think until they were finished. What little passed through his mind was about Philippa Grey, and the quixotic, if idiotic thing she had done for Alice Purnall. That he had been equally quixotic did not occur to him; it was odd that he was often acutely aware of the uglier side of cracksmanship – robbing people he knew – yet rarely pondered over the fact that he used the profit more for other people than himself, especially for Lorna Fauntley, who so often needed money.

It took fifteen minutes to reach the post-office and return to Bloom Street. No one was about, apart from tradesmen, and no one was waiting outside his flat. He smiled to himself as he took off the evening clothes.

Then he discovered that there were marks of the lead shot in his coat; it was a good thing he had been wearing an overcoat when the sergeant had been near him.

He hung the coat in his wardrobe, and stripped for a quick cold tub and a brisk rub down. He felt tired but hungry, and before he had a nap he wanted to eat. He was in the middle of bacon and tomatoes – the service at that block of flats was excellent – when the knock came at the door to tell him of the expected visitor. He opened the door, and saw the spruce figure of Detective-Superintendent William Bristow.

Bristow was a pleasant-faced, clean-cut looking man, with a grey moustache clipped close and stained with nicotine. His hair was grey, and shorter at the sides even than his moustache. He was dressed immaculately in light grey, and there was a carnation on his buttonhole; Bill Bristow without his flower would have been a sensation at Scotland Yard.

He was a capable, shrewd and efficient officer, given more to puzzling out abstruse and complicated problems than the lightning-like raids of the Baron. But he had been assigned the Baron's case some eight months before, had learned the identity of the Baron without being able to prove it. He had sworn that he would catch Mannering one day. The only thing he could not persuade himself to do was to dislike Mannering.

Yet it was a grim-faced Bristow who eyed Mannering and his dressing-gown.

'Hallo, Bill,' said Mannering, and there was a hit in his voice. 'You're up early. Come in.'

‘I’m not so early as some people,’ Bristow growled.

‘Postmen and milkmen beat you to it, do they?’

Mannering stepped to the table and poured a cup of coffee for Bristow, who accepted it with a brusque ‘Thanks!’

‘You won’t mind if I carry on with breakfast?’ murmured the Baron.

‘No,’ grunted Bristow, and Mannering could imagine what was going through his mind.

He had heard of the Teevens burglary, of course, jumped to the conclusion that Mannering had committed it, hurried to Bloom Street determined to get some results – and had suddenly felt at a loss. Bristow always felt like that whenever he tried to trap the Baron. It was a feeling that he detested.

That morning he had hoped to find Mannering in bed, which would be evidence of a negative kind of a very late night. He found him up and cheerful, eyes clear and bright, and in the middle of breakfast. He found him outwardly unperturbed—would the day never come again when Mannering would be off his guard?—and apparently feeling happy.

‘You’re not exactly at your best, Bill,’ Mannering chided as he finished his meal and set his plate on one side. ‘What’s the trouble?’

‘You know what the trouble is,’ growled Bristow.

The Yard man was not only suffering from the inferiority complex which so often overcame him when he was with Mannering; there was an additional cause for ill-temper that morning – he had toothache. Normally he was almost a match for Mannering in repartee, and possessed a lively sense of humour, but neither was in evidence just then.

The relationship between Mannering and Bill Bristow had started when Mannering had first begun to take cracksmanship seriously twelve months before. Among the other things that had happened during the ensuing period was a simple one: Mannering had contrived to save Bristow’s life.

Bristow was often too keenly aware of it.

Mannering, with an appreciation of the detective’s psychology, was convinced that if the time came when Bristow was able to repeat the arrest formula, he would hate his job. There were occasions, of course, when the Superintendent would swear vengeance on the Baron, when his efforts to catch him would reach a positive crescendo; but if the end did come, Bristow would not relish it much.

Bristow was looking very glum that morning and Mannering’s heart began to thump uncomfortably. A little vein in his forehead throbbed during moments of stress, he could feel it moving now.

Bristow actually *knew* something. It was a peculiar fact which Mannering had come to recognise months before, that he was often more afraid when he was safely away from the scene of a crime, than when on the spot itself. He had time to wonder what was going to happen next, time to ponder over Bristow’s manner, time to imagine a dozen ways in which it would have been possible for Bristow to learn conclusively that Mannering had been in Hampshire on the previous night, and near Gus Teevens’s house.

Among other sources of information was the girl.

Mannering did not like to suspect that Philippa Grey had given anything away. He was convinced that she would not have spoken of her own free will, but if Rombell had been approached by the police, and if Bristow had been to see Philippa at the Elan and trapped her with questions, anything could happen.

Had that happened?

Mannering was eyeing Bristow contemplatively, it seemed, and toying with a spoon. He looked lazy, but in the morning so many men looked lazy. He was searching the detective's face for some clue to what was going on in his mind.

And then Bristow laughed.

Mannering's vein stopped beating.

'That's better, Bill!'

'Mannering,' said Bristow, 'you were at Teevens's place last night, weren't you?'

Mannering stopped smiling to frown.

'Teevens? Which Teevens?'

'It's no use bluffing,' Bristow said. 'You were there. The gas-pistol gives you away every time, so does the blue mask. Why not admit it?'

'Said the spider to the fly,' murmured Mannering. 'Bill, I've never seen a gas-pistol in my life, and as for a blue mask – but what happened at Teevens's house? He's a big enough rogue to have plenty of bodyguards, isn't he?'

'He had plenty of guards,' said Bristow. There was tensing about the muscles of his mouth which Mannering noticed even if Bristow appeared to speak casually. 'The night-watchman saw you. I knew your time would come, and . . .'

'My dear Bill!' exclaimed John Mannering. 'What are you talking about?'

Bristow drew a deep breath; his bluff that morning had been clumsy, and he knew it. He was telling himself that it was hardly worth going on, but he was a conscientious officer.

'I'm going to search the flat,' he announced.

Mannering chuckled.

'Search on, William.'

'I suppose that means that you've managed to get rid of the loot,' said Bristow sourly. 'One day you'll be too late.'

'Well, well,' murmured Mannering, and his hazel eyes were sparkling, his lean face more devil-may-care than ever. 'This is a free country, and we can also have free thought. I'm not even going to make you get a search warrant, which I certainly should do. Help yourself – I'm going to dress.'

He waved to the Yard man and went into his bedroom. The only possible thing Bristow could find was the shot-torn coat, and no one could be sure the coat had been torn with gunshot; probably no one would notice it had been torn.

The blue mask and the gas-pistol, with the small set of tools, was at

Waterloo station in an attaché case left under the name of Mayer – Mannering always used aliases with his own initials, to make sure that a Mr. Smith did not leave a case with initials belonging to Mr. Brown; with such small things was the road to the Old Bailey strewn – and an army of police could have discovered nothing incriminating at the flat.

Mannering was immaculate in pale grey when Bristow, who had actually looked through the kitchen, bathroom and living-room, although without much hope, knocked on the bedroom door. His search of the bedroom was cursory in the extreme.

'Satisfied?' Mannering offered cigarettes.

'Thanks,' said Bristow. 'I'm satisfied you haven't got the stuff here. Mannering . . .'

The policeman was about to be serious, and Mannering waited with due deference.

'I've said this often before, and I'll say it again,' Bristow went on. 'You've done very well in the past eight months, and you've amassed money. Why don't you give up while you're safe? I want to see you behind bars, but . . .'

'If the Baron stopped operating, you wouldn't worry about his past. Is that what you're saying?' asked Mannering.

'You're the Baron, and I know it.'

'And I've never admitted it, because it isn't true,' Mannering said blandly.

'The day will come when you'll admit it. To go to Teevens's place last night was madness. You were lucky to get away. The watchman's badly hurt and still unconscious . . .'

Bristow paused for a fraction of a second, trying to get a reaction, but Mannering knew Bill Bristow.

'Poor chap,' he said.

'Teevens is swearing he'll have his own back,' the Yard man went on, 'and Teevens keeps that kind of promise. I'm warning you. You've gone too far already. Unless you stop right away you won't stay free for another month.'

'If I were the Baron I could appreciate that sentiment,' murmured Mannering. 'What did Teevens lose?'

'The main item was a valuable diamond necklace.'

'Do you know whose necklace?'

'Teevens's, of course.'

'Did you hear how he came by it, Bill?'

Bill Bristow regarded Mannering thoughtfully, his eyes screwed up at the corners as smoke coiled upward from his cigarette. He could never really make Mannering out. He knew that the Baron had managed to get at least a hundred thousand pounds one way and the other, that Mannering's bank balance was very healthy, and that there was no need for him to steal. He did not know that Mannering had been seriously thinking of retiring, and that the Purnall necklace had brought him into action.

'No,' said Bristow at last. 'How did he come by it?'

'I'll tell it to you. It wouldn't surprise me if the Baron had heard it first. Alice Purnall was a comparatively rich woman five years ago. Her affairs

were handled by Gus Teevens and a particularly nauseous solicitor by name Lobjoit. You know Matthew Lobjoit?'

'Yes.'

'You shouldn't allow him to practise,' murmured Mannering. 'Teevens and Lobjoit run a crooked game, Bill, even if they're experts at keeping on the right side of the law. One way and another they sunk Alice Purnall's money and shares in phoney securities. Teevens kept the records. Teevens showed "proof" that she had lost money. She is an unsuspecting soul, and Teevens persuaded her to take a certain course of action, which we needn't go into now. He advised her to hold on to certain shares, no matter how low they fell on the market.'

Bristow shifted from one foot to the other. This was the kind of story he could believe of Teevens, yet he stood no more chance of proving it than he did of catching the Baron.

Mannering went on:

'Alice Purnall actually wrote and told him to hold them – he'd asked for confirmation of verbal instructions. He held them. He held them so long that Mrs. Purnall actually lost more money than she possessed. Teevens showed proof again, for he's very clever with accounts. He said that he had put up his own money in an effort to save hers. You listening, Bill?'

'Where'd you hear this story?' demanded Bristow.

'I didn't hear it – I pieced it together,' Mannering answered. 'If I could have found proof I'd have sent it to you. But it all happened. As a result Mrs. Purnall found herself with only a diamond necklace to pay her debts. Teevens accepted the necklace in lieu of payment.'

'Hmm-mm,' remarked Bill Bristow, rubbing his chin.

'Whose necklace was it?' asked the Baron gently.

Detective-Superintendent Bristow left Mannering's flat somewhat happier than when he had entered it. He was sure that the Baron had stolen the necklace; he believed the story about Teevens, and he was relieved at the reason the Baron had for re-entering the field of crime.

Mannering undressed, went to bed, and slept till one o'clock; then he dressed again and went out. The burglary at Teevens's place was widely reported in the Press, for Teevens was a figure in the City, and was on the board of the *Evening Star*. Mannering read the usual statement that the police had important clues, and read with greater interest a statement made by Gus Teevens to the *Evening Star's* representative:

> 'I have always fought vigorously against these thieves,' said Mr. Augustus Teevens, 'and I am strengthened in this resolve by my own loss. They are a pernicious gang, and they *must* be put behind bars. The man who burgled my house last night is known as the Baron. The fact that he possesses a certain glamour with which the gullible public has seen fit to surround him, makes no difference. I shall make every effort to apprehend the Baron, in

co-operation with the police. A man who can act with such violence and show such lack of scruple is a menace to society. I . . .'

'So that's what you believe, is it?' mused John Mannering; and then he began to think very fast.

He knew that Teevens had started on Mrs. Purnall, and if the list he had found on the previous night was a true guide he was going to follow with a certain Mr. Didcotte. After that, Lord Fauntley would have his turn.

Mannering had no idea who Didcotte was, but it must not be long before he found out. As for Fauntley . . .

The angle of the situation worried him, and he decided to visit his lordship that afternoon.

Hugo Lord Fauntley was a small, grey, wispy-looking man with a flair for finance who had profited a great deal from the war without being one of the worst profiteers. Although Mannering had not liked him particularly when they had first met, he had since developed an affection for the little man who behind a pompous and arrogant exterior was really the same Hugo Fauntley who had been chief clerk to a lesser-known bookmaker twenty-five years before.

Fauntley's genius for making money had its limitations, for, like many people, he had suffered badly in the crises in the late fifties, and then again after the Korean War. If he was still wealthy he was by no means as strong financially as he had been when Mannering had first known him. One or two bad deals had added several hundred thousands of pounds to the loss. Mannering knew Lord Fauntley to be a very troubled man.

Most men with Fauntley's present reputed fortune would have considered themselves well off, but Mannering, who knew his love of money for power's sake, could understand why Fauntley considered himself comparatively poor.

He knew also that Fauntley had done a great deal of business lately with Gus Teevens, and he knew that Fauntley had one of the most valuable collections of precious stones in the world.

It was an interesting coincidence.

Mannering, immaculate in Savile Row perfection, something over six feet tall, reputed by many to be the most handsome man in London, walked thoughtfully through the crowded London streets, rubbing shoulders with people who viewed the Baron with horror or admiration, according to their outlook on the sanctity of the property of the rich. It amused him occasionally to wonder what these people would say if he told them the truth. Probably their first retort would be that he was lying.

He was woolgathering again.

Here was a direct threat from Teevens, clever and crooked, to Fauntley, clever and honest according to his light, and it had to be met.

He wished Lorna Fauntley was in London.

There was just one reason why she was away, and a similar reason why

she was not Mrs. John Mannering. She was married. Fauntley did not dream of it, Lady Fauntley did not know. No one but Lorna and her husband knew of her marriage – and John Mannering. The man's name was Rennigan; for his silence he demanded a price that was sometimes more than Lorna could meet, but she refused to let the truth come to light, less because she was afraid for her own reputation than because of the shock the news would bring to her parents.

Mannering knew her reasons and appreciated them, perhaps because few women besides Lorna could be capable of such resolution. In short, she was married to a man and fighting desperately to find money to pay him to keep her secret. Mannering knew that; and she knew that Mannering was the Baron.

It was the obstacle to their marriage, the reason for Mayfair rumours that they were next door to engaged. It was the one thing, he knew, which made Lorna brood too often and made her gloomy. While Rennigan was alive they could only carry on: hoping, loving.

Mannering knew just how worried Lorna was, knew that when she was not working – her painting was winning some critical acclaim – or playing with him, she was thinking of Rennigan. She held her mother in veneration allied to an appreciation of Lucy Fauntley's faults which had made her keep her marriage secret. In a way she was fond of her father.

Fauntley was on Teevens's black list; so Lorna was on it, indirectly.

Mannering imagined he could see into the future. Teevens, clever and unscrupulous, scheming with his equally astute solicitor Lobjoit, was quite capable of forcing Fauntley near bankruptcy. That would smash Fauntley and his wife, and be a terrible blow to Lorna.

John Mannering seemed to warm in advance to the fight that was inevitable.

Theft for theft's sake had little appeal; theft for gain was no longer necessary. But a campaign against Teevens, a Teevens who had issued that challenge in his talk with the Press, a Teevens who was as cold-blooded as well as unscrupulous – or the doublecross of Alice Purnall would have been impossible – gave the Baron a new zest for life.

It was good to be alive!

And it was time he saw Fauntley.

Chapter Five

FAUNTLEY CONFESSES

'Come in, John, come in! Devilish hot today, devilish hot! Gregory, telephone Mr. Teevens that I will see him just after four at his office. Well, John, how are you?'

Lord Fauntley, greyer, more peppery than ever, but obviously tired and worried, shook hands with the man he hoped would one day be his son-in-law, if only Lorna would make up her mind to marry him, and smiled. It was a brave smile, if not a particularly successful one, Mannering saw the dark rings round his eyes and the thin lines at his mouth.

'I'm doing fine,' Mannering said. 'And you?'

'We—ell, not so bad. Not so bad, certainly not so bad as a lot of others. These are dicey days on the market, John. These confounded strikes and rumours of strikes, everyone's unsettled, and money's easy to lose and damned hard to come by. I'm seeing Teevens this afternoon about some shares. He's a good man that – damned clever.'

'Not averse,' said Mannering, pleased that the opportunity for discussing Teevens had come so quickly, 'to making money without being too particular how.'

Fauntley shrugged his thin shoulders.

'I suppose not. Most people are taking what they can get these days, John; they can't afford to be too particular. But I'm still able to keep my gems, eh? You haven't been along to see them lately.'

It was impossible for Mannering to point out to Hugo Fauntley that he had avoided seeing the jewels because the lure of them was almost too strong to be resisted. Half-a-dozen times he had been sorely tempted to relieve Fauntley of some of the minor pieces in his collection, and the temptation grew stronger every time he saw them.

'I've been busy too,' he said.

'Ha! Ha! You busy! I—er—I was wondering if you were going to Scotland, John? Lorna will be up there for a few weeks yet.'

'I'm thinking of it,' said Mannering. He returned to the subject of Teevens. 'Is Teevens saving you anything?'

'I think so. Yes, I think so. He's making me a little, too. Very astute fellow, as I've told you.'

Lord Fauntley leaned back in his chair, pressed the tips of his fingers together, and eyed Mannering uncertainly. He was convinced that there was one man in the world he could really trust with the true condition of his affairs, and that was Mannering. But his natural vanity and dislike of admitting that he was not so clever as he liked to make out had stopped him.

Mannering's second reference to Teevens brought the peer to a point of

decision. Mannering saw the way he pressed his fingertips together, and was half prepared for the revelation to come. He offered cigarettes. Fauntley took one from the case absent-mindedly, his fingers rather unsteady.

'John!' His voice was hoarse. 'I wonder . . .' Mannering did not prompt him. 'John, I'm probably a fool to talk to you like this. You're such a careless chap – money doesn't matter to you. But . . .' Fauntley shrugged his shoulders as though that would explain more clearly what he meant. 'But it's my very life. I've had a long run of success. Ups and downs, it's true, but on the whole, success – and now I'm in a very bad position. I'm nearly cornered!'

Mannering's smile seemed as casual as ever, but his mind was working very fast, the position was worse than he had expected.

'It can't be as bad as that.'

That was all Fauntley needed to start a flood of words.

'Oh, it can, in a hundred ways! I've lost half a million – *half a million* – on the markets in the past few months. I've strained my credit to the uttermost, and without Teevens I'd really be in Queer Street. I tell you, John, that unless the luck turns, I'm going to lose everything. *Everything!'*

Fauntley's pose had gone completely, he looked grey and haggard. The worries of the past few weeks had been more than he could stand. 'I sent Lucy and Lorna up north while I tried to recover some of my losses. Oh, I know that Lucy would be a help in some ways, but I've had to work morning, noon and night, and I didn't want them to be worried. It's—it's dreadful, John.'

Mannering stood up slowly; Fauntley's eyes were on him, almost imploring. Mannering's face was set, and there was an expression in his eyes that Fauntley had never seen before, an expression that was really the Baron's.

'So Teevens has you cornered, has he?'

Surprise replaced Fauntley's expression of despair, and he frowned.

'Teevens has me cornered? Confound it, John, Teevens has been a good friend. Time and time again he has saved me thousands.'

'How much have you lost while you've been dealing with him?' Mannering's voice was hard.

Fauntley was plucking at his upper lip.

'Well – several hundred thousand. But the markets, John – you know how they've been going.'

'I'm not going to suggest that Teevens rigged the market,' said Mannering, 'but he hasn't been far off it. What made you use Teevens? You must know the man's reputation.'

Fauntley looked a little greyer, a little more frightened, and yet more obstinate.

'Oh, I knew he had a reputation for being on the sharp side. But everyone knows he's clever, and he handles accounts for the big people – some of the really big tycoons.'

'While they're doing well, they get on fine,' Mannering said dryly. 'As

soon as they start losing, Teevens gets richer.' He was feeling very bitter, for he could see the almost insuperable difficulties of the situation only too clearly. Fauntley stood up from his chair, his hands in his pockets, his head thrust forward.

'Are you seriously suggesting that Teevens has deceived me? That he's not been straight?'

'I certainly am,' said Mannering. He told the story of Alice Purnall, without discussing the further adventures of her necklace. Fauntley stood like a stone image, staring through his pince-nez. 'And so there isn't much doubt what he's been doing,' Mannering went on. 'But you'—he pushed his fingers through his hair—'you've been playing the markets for so long that it doesn't seem possible Teevens has squeezed you like this.'

Fauntley suddenly lifted his hands from his pockets and clenched them, shaking them towards the ceiling, glaring. 'The swine! The damnable rogue! John, it began when I was away, two years ago. I went with Lucy to Australia, and Teevens looked after my affairs. I lost a great deal, but Teevens was so plausible, so . . . Mannering. I'll have the law on him! I'll have him gaoled!'

'How?' asked Mannering.

Fauntley started to say how, and then dried up. He must have realised that the combination of Teevens and Lobjoit was very formidable. Everything had been legal; perfectly legal, damnably legal!

'It's dreadful,' gasped Hugo Fauntley, 'Awful.'

'How much do you owe Teevens?' Mannering asked. If Fauntley had been a little more self-controlled he might have wondered at the smile on Mannering's lips. He might have seen that Mannering was something more than the eligible wealthy husband for Lorna. He might have seen something of the Baron gleaming from Mannering's eyes.

'I don't owe him much, John. It's just that my own credit's so low. I've been under pressure from some of the banks. I've even mortgaged the Portland Place house. I . . .' Fauntley was looking desperate. 'The only things I've got left are the jewels, and I can't—I can't part with them. Do you hear? If I start to sell the collection, everyone will know I've crashed. Credit will stop altogether, and—and, John . . .'

'Go on,' said Mannering softly.

'It's not only me! I employ two hundred people, one way and another; *they'll* have to go. And Lorna, Lucy. Everything!'

'Who has the mortgage on Portland Place?' asked John Mannering.

'Teevens! John, I'm going to see him. I'll force him to make amends somehow.'

'Easy now,' said Mannering, and he gripped the peer's arm.

'At the time I thought he was so honest, decent – I didn't dream of this. He holds the deeds of Portland Place and the Devon estate. And—John!'

Fauntley's lips were dry, his eyes were staring.

'Let's hear the whole story,' Mannering urged. 'We may be able to see a way round it.'

Fauntley seemed not to have heard him.

'I was going to see Teevens this afternoon. He wants interest due on the mortgage. Only two thousand pounds, but—but I haven't got it! *I just haven't got it!'*

Mannering drew a deep breath, and then started to talk. Fauntley seemed dazed at the sudden bewildering authority the dilettante and man about town had.

'Hugo, it's no use losing your grip. Teevens has fleeced you, and there's only one way of getting back at him. By frightening him. Frightening him into believing that you've enough evidence to go to the police.'

'But I haven't any proof!'

'I'll find it,' said Mannering, and to Fauntley's astonishment he laughed. 'I'll find it, and I'll start by going to see Teevens now. It should be quite a party!'

There was a light in his eyes and a smile on his lips; he looked as though the prospect was the most attractive thing in the world, and Fauntley could not understand the transformation.

'But if you see him, he'll know I'm worried.'

'If you see him, and ask for time with the interest payment, what's going to happen?'

Fauntley gulped.

'I—I suppose he will refuse.'

'He certainly will,' said Mannering. 'But we'll play him with a line that he can't break. He's forced you into a corner, but he can't do anything while you pay the interest. Can he?'

'No – unless, unless I have further losses on the markets. Teevens is handling what I have left, and supporting me with his own money. If he loses . . .'

'Dictate a letter to Augustus Teevens,' said Mannering. 'Telling him to stop dealing on your account from now on, and to send you a detailed statement of the position of your account. That will stave him off for a few days. Give me a cheque for two thousand, to meet the interest. You don't mind what I say to him, I take it?'

'Of—of course not. But I tell you I haven't got two thousand to give! I've enough to keep the office going for a month, and Portland Place. After that, unless the market picks up, I'm done.'

'Teevens can't do any more today,' Mannering said. 'The market's closed. Have that letter registered so that he won't be able to say he's never seen it. Send another by hand tomorrow morning to make sure he doesn't try to.'

'But,' began Lord Fauntley; and then he stopped, for Mannering had taken his cheque-book out and was drawing a cheque for two thousand pounds. Mannering handed it to him, and watched Fauntley sign his own cheque, made out to Mr. Augustus Teevens.

Chapter Six

TEEVENS, LOBJOIT AND CO.

Mannering reached the pretentious Lombard Street offices of Mr. Augustus Teevens just before four o'clock, at which time Teevens was preparing for an interview with Lord Fauntley that he believed would give the peer a shock.

There had been a time when Teevens had been an honest man, and there were still people who believed that he would have made a much better bishop than a stockbroker and a better politician than a prelate. To all whom Gus Teevens, a monstrous man with a flaccid, pale face and very light blue eyes, turned a deaf ear. He possessed a hearty, rumbling voice, was hail fellow well met, and had operated on the Stock Exchange without a rumour against him for over ten years.

There were plenty of rumours now, but Teevens crushed rumours by ignoring them. He had money and power, and saw how he could challenge the law and yet not be caught by it. He knew that there was a fortune to be made out of unorthodox methods, and he made it, defying Scotland Yard and the Stock Exchange. At the time when he was pressing Lord Fauntley as he had pressed many others, he was probably one of the ten richest men in London.

One of the few Teevens had never handled work for was Mannering. Teevens did not know the truth about Mannering, and believed he was fabulously rich. Mannering had spent many years carefully creating that reputation, and it had served many excellent purposes. Actually he was worth about fifty thousand pounds, with an income from gilt-edged shares of three thousand a year. The world could think he was worth millions if it wanted to.

Mr. Augustus Teevens saw Mannering's card on his secretary's hand and gave one of those benevolent smiles which made strangers think that his heart was of pure gold.

'Send Mr. Mannering in, Wigham, send him in!' Teeven's voice, unctuous and rolling, boomed out so that Mannering heard it clearly.

A rather nervous clerk hurried into the waiting-room.

Mannering followed him into Teevens's spacious office – an office with a desk on which stood a dozen telephones and a few papers. The stockbroker was on his feet. Teevens, a great hulk of a man, six feet three in height and possessing colossal girth, extended a large, flabby, beringed hand.

'Come, in my dear Mannering! I've often wondered whether men with your luck and my knowledge couldn't get together, and it's a delight to see you, a real delight.'

Mr. Teevens shook hands, dispensed cigarettes, brought a decanter of whisky from a cupboard with a magician's touch, pointed to a well-upholstered chair and sank back in his own almost in one movement.

‘You’ll drink with me?’

‘Thank you – no,’ said Mannering deliberately.

He leaned back, his hazel eyes on Teevens’s, and despite his apparent lethargy, astonishingly like that of an animal about to spring. Teevens hardly knew why that thought passed through his mind, but it did.

‘Er . . . ‘ Rarely was Teevens at a loss for words, but Mannering’s prolonged stare and his refusal to drink puzzled him. ‘Well, what can I do for you?’

‘I don’t know yet,’ said Mannering.

He was intent only on one thing, getting Teevens on edge. Already Teevens was beginning to frown, and his fat forehead was wrinkled. His expression was still bland, however, and his voice was deep.

‘Well, well, we’ll soon find out. I was saying to Lord Fauntley only the other day that I’d like him to introduce you to me.’

‘I’ve just come from Fauntley,’ interrupted Mannering.

Teevens stopped talking and began to frown. ‘I see,’ he said.

Mannering dropped the next words out casually, and his gaze did not leave Teevens’s face.

‘I wonder if you do see,’ murmured Mannering. ‘Teevens, I don’t like the way you’ve handled Lord Fauntley’s affairs.’

Teevens sat bolt upright in his chair. His benevolence seemed to drop away.

‘That,’ he said, ‘is Fauntley’s business. I have given Lord Fauntley a great deal of help; I have often stretched a point or two in his favour. But what business he conducts with me has nothing to do with any third person. I hope you’ll realise that.’

Mannering laughed, and Teevens’s eyes narrowed still further.

‘I hope the police will realise it, too,’ said Mannering.

‘The police?’ echoed Teevens, and now he was in complete control of himself. ‘I don’t think they could find any reason to interfere. Certainly they could not prevent me from ruining Fauntley if I want to. Do you hear? I advise you to keep out of this, Mannering.’

‘You’re getting quite excited,’ murmured the Baron, and his eyes were sparkling. ‘You’re really afraid of the police, Teevens.’

Teevens opened his mouth, his podgy fist raised threateningly. Then he lowered it, and his chins quivered. The rage seemed to disappear from his voice.

‘Surely there’s no need for us to quarrel,’ he said smoothly. ‘I could easily lose my temper. I’ve done a great deal for Lord Fauntley, and apparently he has been complaining because of his wretched luck on the markets. But it will change, Mannering – luck always changes. A man with Lord Fauntley’s vast resources has nothing to worry about. Now come, let’s have a drink as a mutual apology, eh?’

Gus Teevens picked up the decanter and a glass, taking it for granted that his olive branch was accepted.

‘Bluff isn’t much of an argument,’ Mannering said. ‘You’ve fleeced

Fauntley just as you fleeced Alice Purnall, and I don't like either job.'

The stockbroker jumped from his chair with a movement as quick as the one which had surprised Mannering on the previous night. His fist was clenched under Mannering's nose. His body was quivering and his flaccid face was pink with rage.

'Get out, do you hear? Get out before I pulverise you! Fauntley's finished, and I'll start on you! I . . .'

'Gus,' said Mannering reprovingly, and he sent his clenched fist right into Teevens's stomach. The blow was unexpected and Teevens's resistance to it was negligible. The stockbroker gasped and doubled up, and Mannering stood up, gripping the other's right wrist.

Teevens stopped gasping and tried to free his right arm. Mannering increased the pressure, and Teevens suddenly winced with pain. A stab of fire seemed to go from his wrist to his elbow, and the sweat stood out in beads on his forehead.

'Mannering—Mannering!' He was gasping, for he rarely suffered pain. 'Let go. Let go, I tell you!'

'Sit down,' murmured Mannering.

He tightened his grip and forced Teevens backwards to his chair. The stockbroker dropped into it, breathing very hard. Mannering saw a slightly discoloured bruise on his chin, from the blow of the previous night.

'That's better,' Mannering said, sitting on the edge of the desk. 'Now, Teevens. You've robbed Fauntley—'

'I have done no such thing. He lost his money legally.'

'There's such a thing as legal robbery, and you and Lobjoit should know all about it,' murmured the Baron.

'Lob—Lobjoit,' Teevens gasped. 'He's merely my solicitor.'

'And comrade-in-arms,' said the Baron. 'Well, what's it to be? Fauntley has lost pretty heavily, but he'll write it off as a bad debt if you call his account square and return the deeds of the Portland Place and Devon houses.'

He believed Teevens would make a fight, but he was prepared to try this deal. Teevens was recovering from the pain, and apparently beginning to realise just how dangerous Mannering was.

'Don't be a fool,' he muttered. 'Fauntley must owe me a hundred thousand. I've kept him floating when another man would have let him sink.'

'You're quite the philanthropist, of course,' murmured Mannering. 'It's a pity you're not more appreciated. Is it a deal?'

'I will get every penny Fauntley owes me, or I will make him bankrupt.'

'You made a mistake when you robbed Alice Purnall,' said Mannering. 'Don't make another. Here is Fauntley's cheque for the mortgage interest. Don't take any chances with the law, because I'll be watching and waiting for you to go wrong.'

Mannering waved to Teevens, and moved to the door. He seemed to disappear before Teevens realised he had gone, and for sixty seconds

Teevens stared at the closed door, his face at first blank, then twisted with a rage which would have made Mannering wonder whether the fight was going to be easy.

'I'll smash them both,' snapped Gus Teevens to himself. He snatched up the telephone which connected him by private wire to Matthew Lobjoit.

From Lobjoit's in Bishopsgate to Teevens's office in Lombard Street was a ten-minute walk, but Matthew Lobjoit came by taxi. He was ushered into Teevens's office and Teevens stared up at him for a moment without speaking.

Lobjoit was an inch shorter than Teevens, an abnormally thin man, which made him seem tall. His dry, colourless skin looked even drier when he was side by side with Teevens; his bony hands and lantern-jaws seemed deathlike. Teevens's hair was mousy, Lobjoit's very dark; Lobjoit's eyes too were dark almost to blackness and he wore black, unrelieved apart from the white of his shirt-front and cuffs. They were an oddly assorted couple with one mutual trait, a love of easy money.

'What's the matter, Gus?'

'Fauntley is kicking,' said Gus Teevens, and plunged into an account of his interview with Mannering. Lobjoit, a man who smiled so rarely that it was an unusual phenomenon to see his teeth, listened patiently.

'I've heard of Mannering, of course,' he said at last. *'Is* he dangerous?' Lobjoit seemed sceptical.

'I didn't think so until he came in,' answered Teevens. 'I don't like his methods. He seems very confident, and the fact that he knows of the Purnall business suggests that he's no fool.'

'Can Fauntley wriggle out?' asked Lobjoit, without expression in his eyes or in his voice.

'Of course he can't. He must owe me two hundred thousand pounds, and he's spent the money we advanced him on the mortgages. Fauntley's in a corner, Matt. I think we'll start squeezing right away.'

'Is it wise?' Now Lobjoit sounded dubious.

'It will make Fauntley squeal, and he will appeal to Mannering to keep away from us. We can relax a little then,' added Teevens. 'If we're after Fauntley's collection we don't want him to sell it, or leave it to the Official Receiver, do we? Certainly,' added Teevens, with an ugly scowl, 'not to the Official Receiver.'

Matthew Lobjoit almost smiled.

'No. How much did you say his collection should be worth?'

'Half a million. Fauntley might pay off all his debts if he sold it. We would much rather he went bankrupt after we've taken them.'

Lobjoit nodded, and Gus Teevens smiled for the first time since Mannering had left the office. He did not like to admit it, but Mannering had worried him. Now the danger seemed more imaginary than real. Mannering had tried to bluff him, but Fauntley wasn't strong enough to withstand much pressure, and the threat of bankruptcy would bring him to heel.

'I think perhaps,' said Augustus Teevens, leaning back in his chair and

pressing the tips of his fingers together, 'You'd better send Fauntley a letter tonight, Matthew. Simply tell him that I'm going to press for money.'

'What about his account?'

'It will take several days to make it up, but don't worry about that. He will be frightened by your letter-heading. I cannot imagine him wanting to face the Official Receiver, who will seem very near when he gets that letter. You'll send it as soon as you get back?'

Mr. Matthew Lobjoit, the junior partner in that unorthodox association, nodded sombrely.

On the morning that Gus Teevens received a registered letter asking for the submission of Fauntley's account with Teevens and Co., of Lombard Street, Lord Fauntley received a letter from Lobjoit, Meers and Lobjoit, of 801a, Bishopsgate. Lobjoit's letter was even more peremptory than Fauntley's.

Hugo Fauntley had seen the red light for a long time past; he had seen visions of Carey Street, of the Portland Place house being put under the hammer with its contents, his collection being sold to pay his debts, his ambitions dead. Nearly sixty, he could not see how it would be possible to start life again.

Beneath his arrogant and apparently self-centred manner Fauntley was a kindly man, and more particularly an honest one. It was too late now to wish he had settled more on his wife and daughter. In fact he had settled little and their allowances were paid out of his current banking accounts. He could see no way of salvaging even a modest income from the wreckage, and because of that he had fought desperately, accepting Teevens's promises and offers of help without realising what he was doing. Now the curt letter from Lobjoit showed the red light. He had been half afraid of allowing Mannering to go to Teevens. Now this had come. He could not keep Teevens quiet; God knew what Mannering had said to the man and . . .

Gregory, Fauntley's secretary, tapped on the door.

'What is it?'

'Mr. Mannering, sir.'

'Send him in, send him in!'

Fauntley jumped from his chair and was at the door as Mannering entered. Mannering was a perfect picture of a well-satisfied man, until he saw Fauntley's grey face and haggard eyes.

'John! Teevens has sent a letter through Lobjoit. They've threatened proceedings if I don't remit the account immediately.'

'Has he submitted the account?'

'No, but it's been dragging on for a long time. He's often given me the figures verbally, Mannering. I—I *must* placate him. I daren't risk his enmity.'

'You're all right for some weeks,' said Mannering cheerfully. 'The law, besides being an ass, is slower than a tortoise. You're not going to give way at once?'

Fauntley stood by his desk, harassed and undecided.

'But with Teevens well-disposed, it won't be so bad. I know it seems

ungrateful, but . . .'

'Go and slap Teevens's back if you want to,' said Mannering. 'It will postpone the issue for a few weeks, two months at the outside. The man is a rogue, and you're going to knuckle under to it.'

'I've never knuckled under to anyone in my life!'

'You're starting to now.'

The fighting spirit of the little man, which had brought him from obscurity to wealth and a peerage, suddenly became rampant.

'Damn it, John, I *will* fight! This has worried the guts out of me, but you're right! I won't give way.'

'That's fine,' said Mannering. 'Stick it out and don't worry. I've enough money to tide you over for a few months, so carry on as you always have. Let the bankers see that you're confident, and they'll keep off. Show them you're worried and they'll start pressing you. It's an elementary rule, isn't it?'

'My dear John, of course! I've been so worried I hardly know whether I'm on my head or my heels. I'd even thought of cancelling the reception at Portland Place next week.'

'What reception's that?' asked Mannering.

For the first time for weeks past Fauntley revealed a glimpse of his over-important self.

'My dear John, surely you'd heard of it! I am to show my collection. There are a lot of celebrities in London just now. I've arranged to borrow the Irawa Ruby. Just for the night, just for the night. It's never been shown with a private collection before.'

'Is it too late to send out the invitations?'

'No, no – of course not.'

'Send them out,' advised Mannering with a chuckle. 'How did you manage to get the Irawa Ruby?' he added thoughtfully.

He knew that the famous stone, a pigeon's blood ruby of tremendous size, had been presented in the previous year to the English Museum. The gift had caused a sensation.

'Well, John'—Fauntley rubbed his hands and looked even pleased with life—'I'm chairman of the Museum's Jewel Committee, of course. There isn't much you can tell me about gems. Very little indeed. And to show the Irawa Ruby with my own collection – it will be a sensation!'

'Let's have all the sensations you can manage,' approved Mannering. 'When's the show?'

'Unofficially, I've said next Thursday.'

'Eight days from now, eh? We should know a lot about Teevens's tactics by then,' said Mannering. It was a fact that his laughter gave Fauntley confidence, conversely to the worry it had given Gus Teevens.

Teevens would be even more worried, Mannering felt sure, when he heard Fauntley was acting as though nothing was wrong. Mannering believed as few people could do in the value of appearances. There had been a time when only a few hundreds had stood between himself and

bankruptcy, but the world had called him rich, and his reputation for riches had been stupendous. The world thought Fauntley rich.

Teevens knew better, but Teevens did not know Mannering's resources, and still less did he know that he was fighting the Baron.

Chapter Seven

THE FIRST STEP

John Mannering had told himself that the opening of the fight with Teevens was auspicious. He watched Fauntley very carefully without letting the peer notice it. Fauntley seemed almost jaunty, and Mannering realised why with surprise. Fauntley was a fighter first and last, and with help he would fight to the bitter end.

Two days passed, while Mannering made enquiries of various natures. Meanwhile no further correspondence came from Lobjoit to Fauntley. The newspapers were full of the story of the coming reception at Portland Place, and the Irawa Ruby; photographs of Fauntley, the English Museum setting of the stone, Fauntley's own collection and the Rajah of Irawa littered the pages of the more exclusive weeklies.

The effect was about what Mannering had anticipated.

Fauntley was more cheerful. Those banks which had viewed the credit extended to him with anxiety marked them back for future reference. And Gus Teevens . . .

Gus Teevens was now a very worried man. He could conceive only one reason for Fauntley's show of confidence, and it was the obvious one that Mannering was backing the peer financially. Teevens was by no means sure that his own activities would stand a searching investigation by the police. He had, in fact, made preparations for a hurried departure if at any time Lobjoit slipped up on the legal side of their activities. But he had been convinced that he had Fauntley where he wanted him, and the new situation was something that made him rage.

In those two days Teevens was at a high pitch of ill-temper. Mannering learned of it by devious channels, and was thoroughly appreciative.

On the third morning the stockbroker's account reached Fauntley, who received it while Mannering was in the oSice. The peer's face dropped ludicrously as he went through the figures.

'Two—two hundred and thirty-five thousand! John, it's impossible! He—he says here he held on to Kafflirs until they reached three-and-fourpence – it was madness, madness!'

'Did you ever tell him to hang on to Kafflirs?'

'Yes, yes, but . . .'

'You can't afford any buts with Gus Teevens,' said Mannering. 'But stop worrying. We'll start reprisals very soon, and he'll begin to get worried!'

'Reprisals?'

'That's the word,' said Mannering, 'Teevens is going to have some nasty shocks when they start. Will you remember one thing?'

'I'll remember anything,' said Hugo Fauntley, twisting a forelock of thin hair. 'What is it?'

‘Don’t admit anything Teevens asks you to. Don’t take any notice of anything Teevens accuses you of. Tell him he’ll get his money. In fact,’ went on Mannering, with a laugh that made Fauntley feel that the account was not so vitally important after all, ‘you’d better give instructions that you won’t see Teevens at your house or at your office. Threaten to have him thrown out if he tries to force his way in.’

‘Thrown—*thrown* out?’

‘Hugo,’ said Mannering, gripping Fauntley’s shoulders, ‘I said thrown out, and you can tell him it will be on his neck. You’re keeping Lorna and Lady Fauntley in Scotland, aren’t you?’

‘Yes, until this is over.’

‘When Thursday’s show is over, go and join them. Don’t let anything stop you. I shall probably be away for a few days.’

Fauntley drew a deep breath, looked as though he was going to protest, and then gave way.

‘You certainly know your own mind! But what reprisals are you talking about? What the devil are you up to?’

‘I’m going to get some acquaintances of mine to work,’ said Mannering.

He shook hands with Fauntley and left the office.

The Fauntley Trust Company – formed to handle Fauntley’s own affairs at a time when he had been more than successful, and to maintain those companies which he controlled and which were now in such a bad way – was in Queen Victoria Street.

Mannering was happier now than he had been for months. He had a job to do for the Baron, a difficult job and one for a cause. He cared nothing for Bristow or Teevens; he thought of Lorna and smiled, of Philippa Grey and laughed. He had reached a decision days before, and was going to act on it that night. The first ‘reprisal’ would be to get the deeds of Fauntley’s houses from Lobjoit’s Bishops- gate office; for the first time the Baron was going to operate in the City of London.

At intervals, the twelve notes of a dozen church clocks boomed over the silent City, sonorous and dignified. A policeman plodded past the Old Lady, and met a colleague by the Royal Exchange, stopping for a moment to talk. One or two road-sweepers were busy with their carts; here and there a late worker hurried towards the Bank station for the last train. A bus growled through the deserted streets, not impeded by slow-moving traffic.

London City was asleep.

The policemen parted, one to continue towards City Road, the other along Bishopsgate. The latter touched his helmet to a minor official of the Bank of England, just as the taxi which carried Mannering passed them.

Mannering was leaning back in his cab and smiling in the way that always preceded a nocturnal adventure. The Bank looked the most impregnable fortress conceivable – which it was – but he pondered over the possibility of taking advantage of the work still being done on the rebuilding and getting inside. It might be possible, but getting out would be a different

matter, and the Baron was glad that Fauntley's deeds were not there.

He had been busy in the past three days.

A certain Flick Leverson, only recently out of gaol for buying and selling stolen goods, had greeted him with undisguised pleasure. Flick, a patriarchal-looking man with a reputation for being clever and straight, literally had his finger on the pulse of the so-called underworld.

To Flick Leverson the Baron was ostensibly a middle-aged gentleman with a remarkable propensity for opening safes. To look middle-aged the Baron wore a specially constructed suit, which gave him a slight stoop, rubber cheek-pads to fatten his cheeks, and a streak or two of grey in his hair. None of the things were important in themselves, but together they made a disguise which was well-nigh impenetrable. He had also trained himself to use a dozen different tones when speaking. The portly, middle-aged man who knew Flick Leverson and certain other members of the criminal fraternity looked and sounded nothing like John Mannering.

Leverson had been able to assure the Baron that Matthew Lobjoit had a small strong-room in his offices, and did not use a safe-deposit or a bank for papers and deeds. It was a safety measure on Lobjoit's part, in view of the dubious nature of some of his transactions. Knowing that, the Baron also knew that the job would be straightforward, if not easy.

Round his waist he carried a special set of tools and materials. The job was very different from the country-house burglaries in which he specialised, but it could be done.

He got off the taxi at Liverpool Street, slipped in at one entrance of the station and out of another. It was less than five-minute's walk from there to Lobjoit's office building. This was built on a corner, and, what was better from Mannering's point of view, was part of an L-shaped block. To reach the rear of the premises he had to slip through a narrow alley, which led also to the unpretentious front door of a smaller, older block of offices. He had studied the position carefully.

The turning off Bishopsgate was the first move to call for caution.

Mannering was walking quickly, glancing ahead of him and behind from time to time. He could hear footsteps on the far side of the road, and slowed down a little as a girl hurried along. A hundred yards ahead a policeman walked along, trying the door-handles of shops and ground-floor offices. One shop had a porch, and the man disappeared. The only other human being in sight was a road cleaner. Silence seemed to drop over the City as the Baron slipped down the alleyway.

He went quickly, on his toes despite the fact that he was wearing rubber soles and heels on his otherwise perfect dress shoes. The blue mask was merely a scarf thrown loosely round his neck, beneath his coat. He was wearing thin gloves with rubber fingertips, which would enable him to get a grip without leaving fingerprints.

As he went down the alley his heart was beating faster than usual, his teeth were flashing. The L-shape of the building had its advantages; on the other hand, there was only one avenue of escape. When he reached the

courtyard he paused, listening intently.

There was no sound nearby. From Bishopsgate the heavy plod-plod of the policeman's feet came clearly, so did the tapping of high heels. Twice in as many seconds a car roared past. Then there was a lull.

Leverson had assured the Baron that the patrol on that beat looked at the courtyard twice, at half-past one and again at four o'clock. It was now ten-past twelve.

The Baron pulled his scarf up, knotting it over his mouth and chin so that it served to hide two things – his face and the white of his shirt-front. The gloves were blue, and he merged with the gloom, so that no one glancing casually from a window near would have seen him.

There were no lights on, no sound now, and Mannering stepped quickly across the courtyard to the lowest window.

It was barred; all the ground-floor windows were, an obvious precaution against forced entry. The Baron slipped the body-belt of tools and equipment from his waist and rested it gently on the ground. He picked out a small oil can, and squeezed some of its contents on the sockets of the upright bars. There were two of these, and to take one away would not have given space enough for him to squeeze through. He needed a good exit for the return journey; he had had more than enough of risky return journeys recently.

The oil can contained not oil but an acid which would take three minutes to crumble the cement and make it as pliable as fresh putty, a quick-working solvent that the Baron had used frequently before. He climbed on the low windowsill and started the difficult task, squirting the acid on the top sockets. It took him two minutes; he had three to spare.

He left the tool-kit where it was and hurried to the entrance of the next block of flats. No lights glowed. There was a watchman on Lobjoit's premises, but a watchman who liked sleep and beer.

By the time he reached the window again he could start on the bars.

He waited until the plodding footsteps passed in Bishopsgate again, then for the hum of an approaching car engine. It came, growing louder every second. The Baron wrenched suddenly at the first bar, using both hands. There was a loud crack that was drowned by the car engine. Some of the cement had not softened as it should have done, but the bar came away in Mannering's hands.

The noise of the car engine died away, and only occasional footsteps echoed loudly through the silence. Mannering waited for another car, examining the loosened bar as he did so.

It was chisel-shaped at both ends, and that was going to save him ten-minute's work. He had known that to get in the building he would want to move the bars, and had planned to use one of them as a jemmy. He had done so before, but the tops of the bars had usually wanted filing to a chisel-edge. This time the work was done for him. It was a three-foot bar, long enough to give tremendous leverage, yet not too heavy for comfortable handling.

The silence was about him now, complete and enshrouding. Not even a

footfall disturbed it. He waited until a lorry or bus roared near, then wrenched the second bar, which came more silently than the first.

Now for the window.

It was a heavy plate-glass pane, with the glass painted white on the inside. The glue-and-brown-paper method was useless against it. He would need a smith's hammer to break it in any case, and it would have been practically impossible to cut it with a diamond. He ran his fingers down the hardened putty at the sides.

It was puttied on the outside fairly liberally, and he knew he could get through without much trouble.

His second tool was as humdrum as the oil can, a single-bladed clasp knife. He drew the blade down the sides of the window, breaking the putty away easily. A glazier had put the glass in within the past six months.

Thirty seconds were enough for the operation. He left a few inches down one side, to make sure the window did not fall until he was ready, then tapped the top of it gently drawing the bottom towards him with a vacuum rubber tip which had sufficient force to hold it.

As the top went inward the bottom came outward, and in a few seconds he had the pane of glass far enough from the frame to grip it on both sides. He lifted it out and put it carefully inside the passage on which it opened.

There was still no sound of anyone near.

He stepped into the passage quickly, a dark, wraith-like figure, and lifted the glass back into position after he had brought his tools inside. A little putty along the edges and some gummed paper would deceive a casual observer.

He went through on the ground floor, and turned towards the right. A second, wider passage took him to the front hall. As he reached it the headlights of a car sent a pale glow of light through the windows. He could see the stairs and the lift, and wished the lift was workable. It was not automatic, he knew, but hand-operated.

Three flights of stairs, made of concrete and free from creaking, but the pressure of his rubber soles made a soft padding noise that echoed through the silence. Twice he passed small windows, and the light from the Bishopsgate lamps filtered through.

He reached the third floor; Lobjoit's floor.

There were five doors leading from the T-shaped passage, two marked 'General', three marked 'Private', all with the names of the occupants. Lobjoit's was at the far end of the right side of the T, where the darkness was inky. For the first time the Baron needed his torch, a flat one with a long, narrow magnifying glass, fitted with three bulbs.

He shone it on the lock, and scowled. It was a double Yale, and not easy to open; with a pick-lock it was next door to impossible. He had half expected this, and was prepared to make some noise, but it was disappointing.

If Flick Leverson was a true informer the watchman would be on the ground floor until twelve-thirty, when he would make his first tour of

inspection – providing he was awake. Mannering had ten minutes to work in, and it was hardly enough.

He spent five minutes trying to pick the lock, but it defeated him. He was still working when a man's singing sounded from somewhere behind and below him.

A musical watchman is something of a rarity and the cracksman's true friend. Mannering left his tools on the floor by Lobjoit's door, and crept along to the head of the stairs. The watchman was carrying a storm-lantern, which he swung from side to side, singing in a low-pitched croon, and occasionally muttering to himself for variety. Mannering waited while the man came up step by step, then slipped into one branch of the T as the man walked into the other. He waited for a cursory inspection, then went down the stairs, pressing close against the wall as the watchman walked across the landing and to Lobjoit's room.

Would he see the tools?

The home-made jemmy was lying in the corner of the wall and floor. The man would never notice that, but the other tools might attract attention, by the wall and door. If they did, the watchman would have to be dealt with.

Mannering's gas-pistol was ready.

There was a grunt, a high-pitched line of a popular song, and the lantern began to swing again. Mannering slipped back to his first hiding-place. Singing and muttering alternately, the watchman passed the landing; his words came clearly.

'My, I c'd do with a drop! Tra-la! Dom-dom, *dom*-dom—'

The Baron could have laughed aloud.

He waited until the singing watchman was out of earshot, and then hurried back to his tools. There was much less need for stealth now. He was well away from the street, there were no windows, and the watchman could not hear three flights of stairs away.

The iron bar jemmy was heavier than he thought, but the wedge-end slipped between the door and the upright. Mannering levered on it. Wood splintered, and he forced the jemmy farther in expertly. It was just above the lock as he exerted what pressure he could, pushing downward.

The noise seemed enough to wake the dead, but it probably travelled no farther than the second floor. The Baron worked on it steadily, increasing his pressure all the time, not working in short jerks. He could hear the metal of the lock scraping against the bar, and then a sudden *crack*.

He put the jemmy down quickly and, moving with great speed and sureness, tried the handle. The door opened, and the Baron stepped in, taking his tools with him. He left the door open wide enough to hear any sound from outside.

Lobjoit's big roll-top desk was in one corner by the only window, a small one that was little better than a fanlight. Doors led to the right and left as well as behind the Baron.

Deed-boxes were on shelves that ran round the room, and the Baron glanced at the names, one after the other. He did not see Fauntley's – that

was too much to expect – but he did discover that Matthew Lobjoit had a large number of influential clients.

Both doors had locks as sound as the one which the Baron had just broken. That leading to the left was no use to him, for it went into the clerk's office. The other, on the right, should lead to the strong-room.

He used the jemmy again, and had even less trouble. The door opened in less than three minutes, and he stepped inside.

This was the strong-room all right.

The Baron stood on the threshold with the wide stream of light from his torch swinging round and about, the blue mask over his face, the opera-hat aslant on his head. His heart was beating fast as he examined the lock of the big safe in one corner. It did not take long to realise that it would have to be blown. Gelignite or oxyacetylene were needed, and the Baron seldom used a burner.

He took a small stick of gelignite from his tool-kit. Once the safe door was open, five minutes would see him safely back in Bishopsgate. It could also see him on the way to gaol.

Chapter Eight

THE DISCOMFITURE OF MR. TEEVENS

The Baron was never happy about the need for using an explosive. It was risky and did not always bring results. But that night everything seemed to be breaking with him. Gus Teevens's face seemed to loom in front of him.

He had two small sticks of gelignite and two small fuses with him, but the difficult part of the job was preventing the sound from travelling outside, not blowing the safe open.

Lobjoit's office might have been made for the purpose. The strong-room was built into the wall, a cell little more than nine feet by six. It had no windows, and after the Baron had lighted a five-minute fuse and put the gelignite stick in the keyhole he stepped out of the strong-room and closed the door.

Thirty seconds of the five minutes were gone. He took a large roll of inch-wide adhesive tape from his tool-kit and began to seal the crevices of the door, starting at the top and running down each side, pressing the tape to the door and the framework. Three minutes passed before both sides were done. He was working against time, quickly and smoothly.

The whole task was completed before the explosion came. The strong-room was sealed as thoroughly as a sick room after harbouring a fever patient. Mannering's watch told him he had ten seconds to wait.

The *boom*! came on the eighth second.

In that small office it was devastating. The door of the strong-room creaked, most of the adhesive tape was wrenched away, a dull thud sounded from inside the room. The Baron waited grimly as the noise settled down. Sixty seconds passed before he tore the rest of the tape away and opened the door.

He could have laughed aloud!

The safe could not have been opened more cleanly with a key. The door was standing open, and there was a gaping hole where the lock had been.

His confidence that this was his night increased. He pulled the door of the safe open wider and started to lift the boxes and files one by one, piling them on to the floor.

A small typewritten slip of paper on a corner of each gave him what he wanted. He went through them quickly. Some of the most famous names in Society were here; commerce also had suffered from the Teevens-Lobjoit depredations; the stage and the film world had had their share of misfortunes.

Mannering would have given a lot to have glanced through the contents of some of the boxes, but there were three he was particularly anxious to get – Fauntley's, Alice Purnall's and that of the man named Didcotte.

He still did not know who Didcotte was, but hoped to find out here.

He found Alice Purnall's file first in a single sheaf of papers. Fauntley's box was a different proposition, and Mannering took out a screwdriver, inserted the wedge-point between the lid and the box, and forced the lock.

It snapped with a crack louder in his ears than the explosion, and he jumped up as the lid gaped open, for there seemed to be an echo from outside. He slipped back to the landing, his ears strained to catch the slightest sound.

None came.

'Nerves,' said Mannering to himself.

A quick glance through the papers in Fauntley's box showed him the deeds and other things that might be interesting, but the deeds were the *pièce de resistance.* He bundled them with the Purnall papers and the rest of the stuff, then searched for the name Didcotte.

He soon found it, a box as securely locked as Fauntley's. He forced the lock and put the papers with the others, stuffed the lot into the capacious inner pocket of his coat. So far there had not been a hitch, it was almost too good to be true.

He closed the strong-room door, gathered his tools together, and left the offices. His rubber-soled shoes made no sound louder than a soft padding as he hurried. In two minutes he would be outside; in four, he would be in Bishopsgate; in six, in a taxi at Liverpool Street station.

As he reached the ground floor he heard the crooning watchman, and resisted a temptation to wish the man good night. He reached the window within sixty seconds of leaving the suite of offices. Nothing had been touched; the pane of glass was still stuck in with stiff brown paper. He was working fast now, and his lips were set, for this was the one point in his plan which he had not been able to guarantee as safe, the one time in the night's venture when he would have liked an accomplice to sound the all-clear.

He lifted the pane of glass and rested it inside the passage. Keeping the blue handkerchief about his face, he stepped out of the window.

He had his tool-kit round his waist, and his gas-pistol for emergency in his right hand. He went cautiously, glancing quickly right and left.

No one was there, no sound came. The Baron drew a deep breath, and there was perspiration on his forehead. He approached the alley quickly and hurried along it, his fingers at his mask to take it down when he reached the street.

A faint light from a street lamp at the alley's entrance cast a dim glow. The Baron reached the end, his heart still thumping, the tension of that thirty seconds' walk greater than any he had experienced during the whole expedition.

The street at last, and safety . . .

The Baron was actually starting to take his mask off, becoming Mannering again, when he caught sight of the shadow of someone, pressed close against the wall. He stopped; an involuntary gasp escaped his lips, and as it came the men converged on him. There were three of them, all in

police uniform!

He had walked into a trap.

He stood absolutely motionless for perhaps two seconds, and by that time the first of the policemen was on him, a big man with his truncheon drawn.

'Where have *you* been, sir?'

The Baron answered, but not with words.

He drove his clenched left fist into the policeman's middle like a battering-ram, and as the man gave ground, staggering, the Baron swung round like a whirling tornado, dodging the flaying truncheons of the other two.

He could not use his gas-pistol, for he could not get close enough; it was brute force or nothing.

There was Bedlam let loose. The odds were overwhelmingly heavy.

Desperation urged him to greater endeavours. If he was caught, violence would make his sentence heavier.

He was hitting out right and left with his fists. His pistol was in the gutter, the first policeman was blowing like a ship's siren on his whistle, and the piercing blasts merged with the gasps and oaths of the two men who were smashing at the Baron.

A truncheon caught his shoulder, and for a moment his left arm was numb. Mannering grunted, and did the only thing possible; he swept the man's legs from under him. But a dozen people were rushing towards the spot, cars were pulling up in Bishopsgate.

Cars were pulling up.

The single fact pierced the Baron's mind, and an idea came with it. His mask was still on; only one of the original trio of policemen was on his feet, a man who did not fancy the human tornado. The nearest man from the Bishopsgate end of the street was twenty yards away, while from the far end no one was within fifty yards of him.

Mannering launched himself at the remaining policeman, and sent him staggering. The first man in blue was recovering and went for Mannering's knees. Mannering jumped three feet in the air, over the man's outstretched arms. He heard another heavy body hit the ground, and he was off like a deer, racing towards Bishopsgate. Two policemen and the first motorist to stop his car were running towards him, but not bunched together. The nearest policeman closed on him, but he handed the man off.

The second policeman was young. In the light of the street lamps Mannering could see that he was also burly and grim-faced. He came along like a bullet, and Mannering felt alarm, but did the only thing possible.

He stopped stock still.

The young policeman hurtled towards him, with a motorist less than ten yards behind. Mannering waited until the policeman's hands stretched out and almost touched him, then he bent and made a back. The policeman didn't have a chance, Mannering tossed him over his head, straightened up, and sent him with a thud to the ground.

There was only the motorist to fear now, although there were three or

four people on the pavement. The motorist seemed ready for anything, a tall, sinewy-looking fellow.

Footsteps were thudding behind him now, twenty yards separated Mannering from his nearest pursuer, two from the motorist.

'Better drop it,' said that worthy, and Mannering warmed to him. A laconic, no-heroics type.

'Thanks for the car,' Mannering said, and gripped the man's wrist. A single flick, and the pain that shot through the motorist's arm must have been torture. Ju-jitsu had its points.

Mannering raced on, his handkerchief mask fluttering, his coat tails streaming behind him, his breath coming in short, sharp gasps. No one was within ten yards of the sports car, the engine was still running, the door was open.

Mannering did not wait to use the door; he took a flying leap into the car, slid into the driving seat, grabbed at the brake, put the car in gear and let in the clutch. The engine roared to life as Mannering trod hard on the accelerator, fearing for a moment that she would stall. But he was away, jerking at first, but soon running smoothly.

Men loomed in front of him; he swerved to the right to avoid them, sending others scuttling back. There was shouting and blowing of whistles behind, and a squealing of brakes as other cars pulled up. But the Baron was away!

His ten yards start grew to a hundred. He glanced behind him to see a taxi starting in pursuit with a man clinging to the running-board, but he had a fifty yards start. There was no traffic coming in the opposite direction, and the needle of the speedometer on the borrowed car touched seventy.

Liverpool Street station loomed up.

Mannering saw the clear pavement and the deserted road ahead, and decided to take a chance. The bend in Bishopsgate helped him, for the pursuers were still out of sight. He jammed on the brakes, and while the car was still doing twenty miles an hour, leapt for the pavement.

He staggered, swayed, found his balance and ran towards the narrow side entrance to the station. Behind him the cab was coming, a policeman's whistle shrilling through the keen night air. Mannering heard the crash as the car he had borrowed smashed into the grimy wall of the station and saw a dozen startled porters swing round.

The nearest porter hesitated.

'What was *that,* sir?'

'The Loughton train – one-ten,' gasped Mannering, and the porter recognised a man in a hurry.

'Platform eight, sir, you'll just do it.' Mannering raced down the steps, reached the platform level, found platform eight and the ticket-collector. The hands of the big station clock pointed to ten minutes past one.

'I must catch it!' gasped Mannering. He tossed half-a-crown into the ticket-collector's hands. The man stood aside, and Mannering ran towards the train.

The ticket-collector took it as all in the day's work, and wished he could join the crowd hurrying to investigate the smash outside. He did not look at Mannering, who reached the last carriage of the Loughton train, pulled open the door and scrambled in as the train started off.

The carriage was empty.

Mannering would have given a great deal to be able to drop into a seat and take a breather. He dare not. He took two steps across to the far door, taking in the situation on the other side of the station at a glance.

The line was clear, the platform deserted. He wrenched open the door and dropped lightly on the rails. He jumped across the line and hoisted himself on to the platform, looking away from him. Every kiosk was shut, but the cloakrooms were open.

Mannering walked as sedately as he dared to the cloakroom, hurried down the steps, seeing quickly and with relief that the attendant was missing. He straightened his hair, put on the invaluable opera-hat, stuffed the blue scarf in his pocket, and walked back to the platform.

A crowd had congregated around the entrance to platform eight. The lean motorist, three puffing policemen, a dozen porters and a couple of dozen men and women waiting for the late trains were all infected with the reigning excitement.

Mannering approached the group briskly, his face serious, his heart merry enough for him to do something absurd.

He heard the motorist ask: 'He actually caught the train?'

'Yes, sir.'

'What's the first stop?'

'Woodford Green, but . . .'

The lean stranger swung round to one of the policemen.

'Telephone the Woodford station to send three men there in a hurry. I'll go along to the railway people.'

Mannering had a surprise when the policeman saluted and said 'Yes, sir.' The laconic stranger was a senior detective.

Mannering chuckled to himself in the back of the cab which took him to his Bloom Street flat. He pictured the faces of the passengers on the one-ten at Woodford, where every carriage would be searched for a big man in evening dress and a blue scarf, and with stolen property. He imagined the chagrin of the laconic detective and other police. He made a mental note to make sure that the detective should lose nothing financially.

'And now,' said Mannering to himself, as he slipped the papers from the capacious pocket of his coat, 'let's see what I've got.'

At nine-fifteen on the morning following the Baron's latest raid Augustus Teevens bought his papers as usual from the station bookstall at Staines, found a first-class carriage with a corner seat fore and aft – the fore was needed for Mr. Teevens to rest his patent-leather shoes – and opened the *Daily Courier*.

Next moment he stared at the headlines, his mouth gaping, his eyes

rounded. It wasn't possible. It could not be possible! But the *Courier* would not lie on burglaries, whatever it did about politics and its true-life articles. Gus Teevens, rapidly feeling colder and colder, and breathing faster as the seconds flew, read on:

> The Baron Again
> Daring City Robbery
> Sensational Street Chase
>
> The offices of a firm of solicitors, Messrs Lobjoit, Meers and Lobjoit of 801a, Bishopsgate, were broken open in the early hours of the morning by the Baron, whose exploits are daily increasing in effrontery and daring. The motive of the theft is as yet not known, but one of the most amazing night chases in the history of the City of London startled—

Gus Teevens read on and on. He saw that the suspect was believed to be in the Loughton district. He learned that Chief Inspector Rennett, of the City of London police, had been near the scene of the crime and among those who had grappled with the Baron. He learned still further that the Baron's exploits were written up sympathetically by the Press—the Baron had glamour!—and he was at a high pitch of nervous tension by the time the train reached Waterloo. He half ran towards the taxi rank and clambered into a cab. He was perhaps the unhappiest and most worried man in London. But even then he was beginning to think clearly and wondering whether Fauntley's stuff had been taken.

If so, what did Mannering know about it?

Chapter Nine

SURRENDER

Teevens's flaccid face was paler than ever, his eyes were glittering, his fat hands trembling. The whisky-and-soda at his side, at eleven-fifteen that morning, bespoke his feelings.

Matthew Lobjoit for once did not look a Victorian solicitor of vast stolidity and honesty. His sparse hair was awry, each leathery cheek had a burning spot of red, his hands were clenched and unclenched. He too had a whisky-and-soda.

'All Fauntley's papers, all Didcotte's, all Mrs. Purnall's. Teevens, it's dreadful. Dreadful!'

'For God's sake shut up!' roared Teevens. 'Don't I know it? And nothing else went, nothing! Just those three things.'

'Enough to gaol us for ten years, don't you understand? Teevens, we *must* fly.'

'Don't be a bloody fool,' growled Teevens. 'The police will be watching you for days. You couldn't get as far as Calais. I—who the hell is that?'

The voice of Mr. Teevens's pale-faced secretary came with a quaver after a timid knock.

'Wigham, sir. Mr . . .'

'I'm not in, you fool! I'm not seeing anyone!'

Teevens heaved himself out of his chair, padded to the door and flung it open. He was prepared to do violence to the puny Wigham, and his fist was raised.

'Now, Gus,' said Mannering reprovingly, 'I didn't think it of you.'

Teevens stood in the doorway like a statue, his fist still raised. Mannering smiled, tall, lean, immaculate. Wigham was standing in the background, frantic with dismay. He saw Teevens subside like a punctured balloon, so he slipped away. Teevens retreated into the office. Mannering followed him, closing the door and waving to Lobjoit before he took a chair.

'You're not looking very well, Gus,' he remarked.

'Mannering. You've heard about . . .'

'Last night?' Mannering actually chuckled. 'My dear Augustus, I paid for that job to be done. I admit that in the presence of two witnesses. The proceeds were given me two hours ago, I will admit,' added Mannering, putting the tips of his fingers together, judicially, 'that the results are even better than I'd hoped.'

Teevens could not speak. He collapsed into a chair, and eyed Mannering as he would a cemetery of ghosts. Lobjoit licked his dry lips.

'Mr. Mannering, you have just admitted in the presence of witnesses that you compounded a felony. I . . .'

'Remember,' said John Mannering, with an amiable smile at the solicitor,

‘it was only one felony. Some people manage to commit quite a number. Sit down, Lobjoit.’

Matthew Lobjoit sat down. Mannering adjusted the crease of his trousers, took out cigarettes, lit one, and replaced the case. He looked prosperous and very contented.

‘It’s a pity that this has happened,’ he remarked. ‘It’s a greater pity that you ever tried to rob Fauntley.’

‘I didn’t rob Fauntley! I merely handled . . .’

‘Some of his business affairs. You lied to him, fooled him, cheated him, showed results on paper that aren’t borne out by facts, blackmailed him and threatened him. I have an idea,’ went on Mannering gently, ‘that in the list there are certain offences against the law of the land, but Mr. Lobjoit can doubtless correct me.’

Lobjoit was screwing pieces of paper up and staring ahead of him, his lips trembling. Gus Teevens had become a quivering hulk.

‘I,’ he bleated. ‘I . . .’

Mannering chuckled.

‘You have lost,’ he told Teevens, ‘you know what was in Fauntley’s box, and in Alice Purnall’s. Clear evidence of the fact that you dealt in *hundreds* and pretended these were thousands to Alice Purnall, to Fauntley. In short, Fauntley is supposed to have lost two hundred and fifty thousand pounds, whereas he lost twenty-five thousand. Alice Purnall lost forty thousand, whereas she lost four. Gus, that’s very bad. The minimum sentence would be ten years, although you’d probably get another four on another charge – blackmail. You’re both faced with fourteen years in gaol. What does that feel like?’

Neither Teevens nor Lobjoit said a word. They stared at Mannering, their expressions of sheer hopelessness.

‘I suppose,’ said Mannering, ‘you would prefer me not to go to the police?’

Lobjoit found a trickle of courage.

‘If you do I’ll tell them what you’ve admitted. You compounded . . .’

‘Do you seriously believe the police will believe in the story of two crooks?’

Lobjoit did not try again. He sank into a frightened silence.

‘So you know what you’re up against,’ Mannering said. ‘I hold those papers, useful now or at any time to prove what you’ve been up to. And a further search of your strong-room, Lobjoit, would doubtless open the official eyes to a great deal of other peculiar deals. But I will strike a bargain with you.’

Teevens snatched at his glass, tossed the whisky down, and looked at Mannering with a new-born hope. Lobjoit gulped and stood up.

‘Mannering, I’ll do anything, anything, if you will return those papers. I’ll do anything!’

‘I won’t return the papers,’ said Mannering. ‘There are some things that would be too easy for you. But I’ll undertake to say nothing to the police – if

. . .'

'But how shall we know that?' demanded Teevens.

'The very fact that you won't be arrested will help you to understand,' smiled Mannering. 'But you may not like the other conditions. You will call Fauntley's account balanced, and you will repay him one hundred thousand pounds. He will—'

'Mannering, it's madness, we can't do it.'

'The only alternative is the police,' said Mannering. 'Do your best, Gus. Fauntley will keep his deeds, and you will return any correspondence that might have passed between you. You will also write to Alice Purnall and tell her that owing to an error – or because certain investments have jumped suddenly – you owe her twenty thousand pounds. Have it done in forty-eight hours. And for ever after,' added John Mannering, more grim now than he had been for the past ten minutes, 'be strictly honest. I'll have you both watched, so don't slip up again.'

Mannering stood up, smiling down at his two victims. He knew that they had been let off lightly, but he dared have no brushes with the law. They were worth half-a-million pounds each, and the retribution would serve as a lesson from which they might benefit.

Teevens broke a long silence.

'We—we'll do it, Mannering. But what about Didcotte's papers?'

There was perspiration on Teevens's brow, and a dry sweat on Lobjoit's leathery face. Mannering chuckled to himself, but contrived to look puzzled.

'Who is Didcotte?'

'You know who I mean. His papers were taken with the others!'

'You'd better try and find the thief,' said Mannering. 'He's probably going to use them.'

'But you must know who he is!'

'My dear Gus, I don't mix with the fraternity. I went to an acquaintance and told him what I wanted. The papers reached me by post this morning. I certainly wouldn't dream,' added John Mannering, gathering his hat and stick and stepping to the door, 'of doing anything which might implicate me. Don't forget, forty-eight hours from now Fauntley's to have full credit for his account and a cheque for a hundred thousand pounds. Mrs. Purnall wants twenty thousand. If it's not arranged by midnight on Friday, up goes the balloon.'

Mannering paused just long enough to bow sardonically, to raise his eyebrows and make himself look positively Machiavellian, and to leave a lingering impression of a lithe, brown-skinned, supremely confident man in the minds of Augustus Teevens and Matthew Lobjoit. He left the room, passing the nervous Wigham, who saw Mannering smile and told himself that there was a chance that Teevens would be in a better temper now.

But Wigham was wrong.

Both the Baron and John Mannering were busy next day.

It was the day of the display of Fauntley jewels, and Fauntley behaved

well enough to create the impression that he was the happiest man in the world. Mannering had not yet told him of the brush with Teevens and Lobjoit.

Mannering went to the Portland Place house to see the collection. There were more precious stones there than he had handled in his life, an ironic thought. As a result the place was crawling with uniformed policemen and men in plain clothes. The Irawa Ruby was the star piece, a wonderful pigeon's blood gem worth every penny of a hundred thousand pounds.

The Baron in Mannering felt wistful at the sight of such wealth about without the opportunity for staging a raid, but he had long since put Fauntley's stones beyond bounds.

He was about to take his leave when he saw Bristow talking to a tall man in pale grey. He approached the spruce detective smilingly and tapped his arm. Bristow wheeled round, and the other man with him.

It was a nasty moment for the Baron.

He found himself staring into the eyes of Chief Inspector Rennett, of the City Police, a man who looked at once capable and ruthless.

Mannering kept smiling, but his heart was thumping.

Rennett stared at him; and Bristow drew a deep breath. Mannering was telling himself for some odd reason that this was a showdown, that Bristow had come here particularly to see him, to let Rennett see him.

'Hallo, Bill,' he said, and he was relieved to find that his voice was steady.

Bill Bristow smiled in apparent good humour.

'Hallo, Mannering! Rennett, this is Mr. John Mannering. Chief Inspector Rennett, of the City Police.'

Mannering and Rennett nodded. Rennett was smiling, and the Baron could not rid himself of the feeling that the man *knew* him.

'Haven't I seen your name displayed recently?' Mannering was taking the bull by the horns; attack, attack, always attack!

Rennett chuckled, and Mannering warmed to the man.

'That little affair at Liverpool Street.'

'A lively customer, your thief.'

'We all admit that of the Baron!'

Mannering chuckled, feeling much easier.

'Don't tell me you're falling for Bill's *pièce de resistance.* Take a burglar in a blue mask and call him the Baron.'

Old Bill snorted.

'Look here, Mannering; I—'

'No offence, Bill, no offence.' Mannering took out cigarettes and proffered them. Rennett, his keen grey eyes sweeping the Baron up and down, obviously had a sense of humour. 'I suppose you're hoping the Baron will try something today?'

'I doubt it,' said Bristow. 'Now I've seen you.'

Mannering shrugged. That was little more than a broad hint that he had told Rennett of his suspicions.

'I can't see the connection, Bill. Mr. Rennett, be advised by me and don't

accept all Bristow's theories.'

He smiled, excused himself, and stepped across to the Dowager Countess of Kenton, who adored John Mannering despite the fact that the Dowager, being rich and fond of jewels, had suffered at the Baron's hands. The Countess was an elderly woman who carried her age well. In some ways she was a likeable old soul, with her lined, faded face and her wonderful dresses, and the jewels that sparkled on her scraggy hands.

'Oh, John, I've been waiting to see you! I heard from Lucy yesterday, and she said that Lorna was hoping that you'd go north and . . .'

'I'm planning to go up on Monday or Tuesday,' agreed Mannering. Lucy, Lady Fauntley, was a bosom friend of the Dowager.

'That's splendid, that's splendid,' said Lady Kenton, 'er, John, did I see you talking to that policeman?'

'Yes, but there's nothing to worry about today. And Bristows all right.'

'I detest the man,' said the Dowager. 'Well, John, what *do* you think of this wonderful exhibition? What a pity Lucy missed it – and Lorna, of course. I've never seen such jewels, and I'm sure no one else could have done. I—my dear, *must* you go?'

'I'm sorry,' said Mannering, shaking hands, 'but I must.'

He took his leave of Fauntley soon afterwards, and sauntered to Bloom Street.

The papers he had taken from Lobjoit's office were now in a safe deposit, but he had copied certain information about a Mr. Jonathan Didcotte. Before thinking about the Didcotte affair, Mannering read a letter that had just arrived. It was from Flick Leverson, although it was signed Jones, and told Mannering that Chief Inspector Rennett's car had been insured, but that the Chief Inspector had suffered a net loss of just under twenty pounds due to damage to uninsured property.

Mannering, who always carried a reserve of cash, put twenty pound notes in an envelope with a slip of paper reading, 'With the compliments of the Baron, for unwitting damages,' and afterwards registered the letter to Rennett at the City Police headquarters. He burned Leverson's letter, then took out a written summary of the affairs of Jonathan Didcotte. Didcotte appeared to be an American millionaire who was soon to be a victim of Teevens and Lobjoit.

That the precious pair would leave Didcotte alone was now practically certain, but there was information about him in the papers, in particular that his methods of making money were not always legal.

Mr. Didcotte was worthy of a visit, and the Baron decided to locate him very soon.

Chapter Ten

MANNERING IS SURPRISED

The papers which the Baron had taken from Lobjoit's office had given him Jonathan Didcotte's address, but had failed to record any note of his clubs or hobbies apart from the fact that he was a financial juggler with few scruples.

The Baron was in the saddle in earnest now. He had started because of Teevens and the Purnall necklace, and the first haul had given him the momentum that had been missing for some time past. The fact that Fauntley was out of the mess in which he had managed to entangle himself meant that Mannering was unlikely to have any urgent demands on his resources. But the desire to work was there, and a curiosity about Didcotte was overwhelming.

The cryptic pencilled note in the stolen papers had been illuminating; it had read, 'Connected with Raviky, Krugen and other affairs.'

The Baron's imagination could fill in many blanks, for the information showed that Jonathan Didcotte had been associated with two financiers who had painted Europe red.

But where was he? And why had Mannering never heard of him?

Mannering decided to get in touch with Flick Leverson again, this time in person. Before going to the East End he took a train to Wimbledon, where he rented a flat as Mr. Mayle, but he did not go as John Mannering. He spent some time with his make-up box, and in front of his eyes became that rather plump, fat-faced gentleman of business or one of the professions. He went first to Wimbledon because he had been away from his house there for some weeks, and wanted to prepare his housekeeper.

The house was called The Grove, and was a small detached residence, hemmed in by a tall hedge and stunted trees, facing the Wimbledon-Merton road and backing on to Wimbledon Common. Mrs. Jenson, the worthy keeper of Mr. Mayle's keys, was a short, stout, red-cheeked body of a type to be met in hundreds in the Home Countries, who knew she had a good job – for Mr. Mayle was away travelling so often – and did her best to justify it. Mannering had told himself occasionally that Mrs. Jenson had an eye to the future and matrimony; what she would have said had she seen him without the padding round his middle, the packing that gave his back a slight hump, and the rubber cheek-pads that fattened his cheeks Mannering could not imagine.

He found The Grove invaluable for receiving parcels and letters that he did not want the police to find at his flat.

Mrs. Jenson beamed as she opened the door.

'Bless my soul, sir, I did think you'd forgotten me!'

'Could I ever do that?' Mannering smiled.

'Stop your blarney,' retorted Mrs. Jenson, and laughed to show sound

teeth. ‘Will you be staying for a few days?’

‘Probably,’ said Mannering cautiously. He committed himself as little as he could as Mr. Mayle. ‘Is there any post?’

‘Why, yes, sir – a pile in your room. Will you be in to dinner?’

‘No, but I’d love to have some tea.’

Mannering went sedately up the stairs to his bedroom. The letters and parcels addressed by John Mannering to Mr. Mayle were waiting, including the odds and ends he had taken from Teevens’s house. He burned most of the letters, sent to keep the existence of Mr. Mayle real to Mrs. Jenson, without opening them. He slipped the trinkets into his pocket, and went downstairs to toasted muffins and home-made pastries.

As Mr. Mayle he had an experience of home life that was very different from that at his flat or at the Elan, where he stayed from time to time. Mrs. Jenson kept on laughing at the sallies of her good-natured, prosperous and not-so-bad-looking employer, and protesting when he said he had to go. Mannering felt a curious kind of contentment when he left the house and went, by various stages, to Wine Street, Aldgate.

Wine Street was not a pretentious thoroughfare, but it housed two doctors and a solicitor. Between the two doctors’ residence was a small terrace house that looked spruce and clean from the outside and was as clean as a new pin inside.

A neatly dressed maid opened the door, standing aside as she saw Mannering, whom she knew as Mr. Smith.

‘Mr. Leverson is in his room, sir. He says you can go straight up.’

Flick Leverson was perhaps the most honest and astute fence in London. He had been watching the street and had anticipated Mannering’s call. Had a policeman approached from either direction Leverson would have had any stolen goods on the premises secreted. The only time he had ever been gaoled was after he had been travelling with stolen jewels in his pockets, and a ‘split’ had informed the police. Only Leverson himself knew where he hid his jewels in the Wine Street house.

Leverson was a tall, white-haired, amiable-looking man, with glowing cheeks and a charming smile. He had only one arm.

‘Come in, come in.’ Leverson extended his right hand, waited until the door was closed and the girl out of earshot, although he could trust his servants, and then chuckled. ‘How’s the Baron these days? He’s been busy, I’m told.’

‘I’ve heard the same thing,’ said Mannering drily.

He did not glance round, for he knew the room well. It was plainly furnished, but every stick and every ornament was a genuine antique. Mannering knew the value of the furniture was at least twenty thousand pounds, and he knew also that in private life – as apart from his profession – Leverson was a genuine dealer and a lover of old furniture.

‘A very daring job, the Bishopsgate one,’ smiled Leverson, taking glasses from a cupboard in a Queen Anne desk. ‘You’ll have a sherry? Or a . . .’

‘Thank you.’ Mannering sat down and took a cigar-case from his pocket.

He extracted a cigar and pressed the thick end. The cigar opened down the middle, revealing an opening three inches long and half an inch wide; Leverson chuckled.

'A new hiding-place, eh?'

Mannering smiled as he let half-a-dozen small stones fall from the hollow interior of the cigar.

'A trick cigar some humorist sent me at Christmas. I've only just realised how useful it can be.'

'Yes, yes, you're very slow,' smiled Leverson. 'Now try a real cigar. Habana Perfectione – and perfection they are.'

Mannering watched him pour out the sherry and take a cigar-box from his desk. The trinkets were scattered about it, although Leverson had not apparently glanced at them. Mannering sipped the sherry and pronounced it good.

'The Bishopsgate job wasn't too clean,' he admitted.

'The devil looks after his own, eh? I can't say I think that's much of a haul from Teevens and Lobjoit.'

'What are they worth?' asked Mannering.

He knew that Flick Leverson was a fence; he knew that most fences could not be trusted, yet he was prepared to take Leverson's valuation of stolen gems as final.

The white-haired old gentleman – a perfect portrait of a country squire, Mannering often thought – picked a diamond ring from the desk, glanced at it and flicked it back to the desk. That little habit of his annoyed many people, and had also earned him his nickname.

'Well, that's a good stone.' He repeated the manoeuvre with an emerald pendant, a ruby brooch, a diamond hair-clip and two other rings. 'All fairly good. Seven-fifty.'

'Thanks,' said Mannering, and the subject of the deal was finished. 'Yes, it's a poor showing for the two jobs, but there should be more to come as a result. The necklace . . .'

'I've heard,' smiled Leverson. 'Mrs. Purnall has it back.'

'How *do* you get your information?' Mannering demanded.

'There are ways and means. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Purnall was trying to borrow some money from a friend of mine, and yesterday cancelled the negotiations. She also said that Teevens had rescued the money she had "lost", and had returned the necklace. So we live and learn,' went on Leverson. 'You're a strange man, Smith. You risked burgling Lobjoit's place for Fauntley, of course. You'll forgive me for making it quite so blunt, but . . .'

'What made you think so?' asked Mannering.

'Because Fauntley's papers were stolen with Mrs. Purnall's and Didcotte's; I know you know Mrs. Purnall, or she would not have had her jewels back. You've made enquiries about Didcotte, so the other motive must have been Fauntley.' Leverson laughed. 'But I'm not curious. I've some news for you.'

Leverson stood up and stepped to a small cupboard in the far corner of

the room. He unlocked it, taking out several wads of five-pound and one-pound notes. Mannering heard him counting them under his breath, and waited until the fence turned to him again, handing over the payment for the jewels.

'Thanks. Did you say news?'

'Yes, yes, and good news, I hope. I've traced Didcotte's movements for you. He's an American, aged forty-eight, rents the flat you told me about, is a member of the American Club, and patronises Mendor's when he's in London.'

'Mendor's? Yet I've never met him.'

'Perhaps because he's such an unassuming man,' said Leverson. 'One of those men you can sit with in a railway carriage for a hundred journeys, and know the colour of his eyes and his taste in ties, but not his name. He is reputed to be worth several million pounds,' added Leverson.

'It's first-class news,' said Mannering.

Mannering spent that night at Wimbledon, breakfasted off an excellent ham, Mrs. Jenson had cooked the previous night, banked Leverson's seven hundred and fifty pounds to Mayle's credit at Putney, and then returned to Bloom Street, changing in a public cloakroom, a device he often employed.

From Bloom Street he went to Fauntley's home. Fauntley was bouncing about the house like a two-year-old, and he came rushing into the hall to greet Mannering, looking ten years younger.

'My dear John, a thousand thanks, a thousand thanks! I could hardly believe it this morning!'

'Steady,' said Mannering, and glanced towards a butler whose discretion might be perfect but whose tongue might wag in wine. Fauntley half dragged Mannering into the library, poured out his thanks afresh, and demanded to know how the miracle had been accomplished.

Mannering knew that he had achieved a great deal that mattered in the past few days.

If Fauntley should ever learn that he was the Baron he would not talk, for indirectly Fauntley himself would have benefited from the Baron's exploits. Mannering did not want him to know the truth, but he was always prepared for emergencies.

He told Fauntley what he had told Teevens; that through an acquaintance he had arranged to get the papers from Lobjoit's offices. Fauntley had to gasp a little before he swallowed this, but then he saw the beauty of it, and was consumed with laughter.

Teevens had forwarded the necessary cheque and the credit for the outstanding account, so Hugo Fauntley's worries in that direction had disappeared.

Now for Jonathan Didcotte.

Mannering reached the Mendor Club at half-past two on that warm spring day in late April. A stalwart instructor at the gymnasium – Mendor's catered for most things – was an old friend of Mannering's.

‘And how are *you* today, sir?’

‘That’s a good habit of yours, Willis,’ smiled the Baron. ‘I don’t know anyone else who can make a “you” sound like “the only man in the world”.’

Willis, a giant whose sweater and flannels clung tightly about his bulky curves, guffawed. He was a red-faced Cockney, with a Cockney’s wit and sense of camaraderie, and a Cockney’s love of praise.

‘Now then, sir, stop kiddin’! What’s it to be today?’

‘I’ll take you on for three rounds,’ offered the Baron, ‘but put a mask on first – I’m getting dangerous.’

Willis’s guffaw echoed to the roof of the gymnasium, an annexe to Mendor’s Club with a glass roof and mesh-glassed walls. It was a spacious building with wall bars down two sides, a collection of horses and parallel bars at one end, a sanded square for jumping, and, through a narrow door, a smaller room for fencing, one of Mannering’s pet hobbies.

But Mannering also liked to use his fists, for a rapier or swordstick was useless to the Baron, and as soon as he had changed they repaired to the ring, roped off at one end of the gymnasium.

He wore only trunks; so did Willis. If the instructor’s muscles were like bunches of steel Mannering’s were like whipcord, rippling beneath his white skin as he moved. He shadow-boxed for a few moments, then started to mill with the instructor.

He was trained to the minute, and he was two stone lighter than the other. He danced round the man, landing a blow with the gloves from time to time, taking a few when he mixed it, but smiling most of the time. Willis was breathing hard at the end of the third two-minute round.

A small, perky assistant laughed. ‘I wouldn’t like to see Mr. Mannering *‘it* yer, George.’

‘You go and drown yerself,’ said George between gasps. ‘You certingly are getting me whacked, sir. ‘Ow the ‘ell you do it I don’t know.’

‘Flattery isn’t your long suit.’ Mannering strolled to the wall bars, and spent a couple of minutes hauling himself up with one hand and two – like his antics in the tree outside Teevens’s house.

‘Is Laporte in today?’

He mentioned the name of the chief fencing instructor, and George Willis shook his massive head.

‘’Ad a touch of ‘flu, sir, so ‘e’ll be out this week. I’ll give yer a turn.’

‘I couldn’t miss you with a penknife, George. Had any strangers here lately?’

‘Noo members, sir? One or two. Who was you thinking of?’

‘A man named Dedcote or Dencot or . . .’

‘Didcotte, sir. Oh, he’s not a noo member. Been here fer years, but ‘e travels a lot – only in London a couple of months in a year.’

‘Is he in London now?’

‘Expecting him here any time,’ said George Willis. ‘Shall I tell him you were asking about him?’

‘Mum’s the word, George. I’ve only heard of him, and I’m not sure . . .’

'You'd like Mr. Didcotte,' said George Willis, with complete assurance. 'Just your type, sir, allowing the liberty. Mum's the word O.K., but I'll drop a hint when he comes in.'

Mannering amused himself for the next twenty minutes on the ropes and the parallel bars. Altogether he had been working out for an hour when George sauntered up to him.

'Mr. Didcotte's comin' out of the dressing rooms, sir, for a bout. Shall I suggest 'e has it with you?'

'What's this?' demanded Mannering darkly. 'A plot?'

'Don't 'it 'im 'ard,' requested Mr. Willis with a wide grin. 'Comin' in right now, sir. I'll introduce you.'

George sauntered away, and Mannering jumped five feet from a standing start, moving towards the door and Jonathan Didcotte.

Didcotte was as tall as Mannering, if not taller – near middle-age, although carrying himself like a young man. He took a horse in his stride, and tapped George Willis's shoulder.

Mannering studied Didcotte closely while seeming to stand easy. The man was not good-looking, but seemed the healthy, golf-and-tennis type. His features were good, except for his broken nose. His skin was a little on the ruddy side, his eyes were blue and alert.

And this was the man who had been connected with the Krugen and Raviky swindles.

Willis turned round.

'You wouldn't mind, Mr. Mannering, would you?'

Mannering sauntered towards the couple, smiling to Didcotte. 'Of course not. What is it?'

'Mr. Didcotte would like a few rounds, sir, and I'm telling him you've blown me proper.'

Mannering smiled at Didcotte.

'Really care for a spar?'

'Treat me gently,' murmured Didcotte in the rather slow, slurred voice of the Southern American. When he took off his sweater Mannering saw that he was in excellent condition. And when they finished with the gloves twenty minutes later Mannering had considerable respect for Jonathan Didcotte. He was a careful, thoughtful boxer, as distinct from a fighter, and Mannering's chest was red from several sharp blows. Didcotte's broken nose looked a little on the puffy side.

'That's enough,' he smiled. 'I've not seen you here before have I? Although the name's familiar.'

'I haven't noticed you,' Mannering said. 'It's odd, George usually puts the well-matched pairs together.'

'Perhaps he looks on you as dangerous,' suggested Didcotte.

Mannering laughed, but a question flashed suddenly through his mind. That remark sounded almost as though Didcotte *knew* something he should not know. It might have been pure coincidence, of course, but that 'dangerous' had sounded full of double meaning.

They had a shower, dressed and walked into the main club rooms. A billiard-table was free, and Mannering raised his brows interrogatively. Didcotte nodded.

'And I'll take a lemon squash,' he said.

'I'll join you. Something stronger later.'

'I'm always a soft drinker,' smiled Didcotte, taking a cue and rolling it on the table. 'Will you break?'

'We'll toss for it.'

'May the slickest man win!' said Jonathan Didcotte.

Again Mannering had the feeling that there was more than the surface meaning in the words. Didcotte's manner and intonation suggested it, and Mannering was wary.

He was no beginner with a cue, but Didcotte left him standing, reaching five hundred in just over the hour. Mannering put up his cue and proffered cigarettes.

Didcotte shook his head.

'No, thanks. The only one of the three vices I've got is swearing.' He was looking into Mannering's eyes, and smiling. Those blue eyes *did* hint at something, but Mannering could not be sure what it was, although his mind was a medley of thoughts and questions now. He lit his own cigarette as Didcotte glanced round the deserted billiard-room.

'Well, I'll be going. Oh, and thanks.'

'Thank you,' smiled Mannering.

'Only mine are due,' said Jonathan Didcotte, with a cheerful laugh. 'I was worried all the time Teevens had those papers. When you've finished with them you'll let me know?'

Chapter Eleven

CHALLENGE!

The only change in Mannering's expression was a slight tightening of his lips, and a narrowing of his eyes. His smile remained, and his eyes were still gleaming, although he succeeded in creating the impression that he was puzzled. He was feeling far more helpless than he had when the three policemen had pounced on him on the night of the Lobjoit robbery. The words from the American were devastating. *Didcotte knew!*

But damn it – Didcotte could not know.

'"Teevens" has a familiar ring,' murmured Mannering at last, 'but I don't quite get the meaning of "the papers".'

'You don't have to bluff with me, friend. I've a different way of earning a living – that's all; and with those papers you've enough to see me in a French prison for years. So be frank, won't you?'

'I'm as frank as the day, but obtuse. Is it a new game of "knock, knock"?'

'My dear Mannering, do I look like a joker? I know all about the robbery.'

Mannering lit another cigarette. He was recovering his balance, although Didcotte's knowledge still startled him.

'That's fine. Now if you'll tell me we'll share the secret.'

'Perhaps you're wise,' Didcotte said. 'I'd like to tell you this, all the same. I need those papers badly, and I'm going to get them. Oh, I shan't get rough, but I'll get them.'

'I'll get some papers to oblige,' offered Mannering.

'Thanks. Are you'—Didcotte's eyes were gleaming—'free for dinner tonight?'

'Yes.'

'I've been wanting a talk with you. At my hotel?'

'I know a splendid and secluded corner at the Elan,' said Mannering.

'Just as you like.' Didcotte looked thoughtful. 'Seven forty-five at the Elan.'

'I'll be there,' said Mannering.

Mannering smiled and waved, then sauntered towards the reading-room. Didcotte left Mendor's – the club was in Shaftesbury Avenue – leaving behind him a very thoughtful man. Mannering had not been so puzzled for a long time past, although one thing was absolutely certain.

Didcotte *knew* him as the Baron.

The American's brazen nerve and his easy *sang-froid* combined to make Mannering like him. Yet beneath those smiling blue eyes and that soft, slurred voice Mannering had seen a power which demanded respect, and although he tried to think little of the affair, he was worried. Didcotte would be a different proposition from Teevens.

How could the American have learned the truth?

There were two possible sources of information as far as Mannering could see – Flick Leverson or Gus Teevens. Mannering ruled Leverson out; so Teevens had been talking.

That seemed the solution, but Mannering knew that he would not be satisfied or easy in his mind until he was really sure.

There was a letter from Scotland waiting at the Bloom Street flat, and the next hour passed quickly. Letters from Lorna were few and far between, usually saying very little, but somehow conjuring up her face, which could be mutinous and contemptuous and yet change suddenly and look divine. Mannering was in a good frame of mind when he reached the Elan. He had expected Didcotte to be punctual, but at seven-fifty Didcotte had not arrived. He began to smile – and then suddenly alarm surged up in him.

The attendants and some of the guests at the Elan saw him rush to the swing-doors and shout for a taxi. As they gaped, he gave his Bloom Street address to the cabby, and sat back, angry with himself for being blind. He should have seen through Didcotte's talk, and should have suspected the trick.

The taxi pulled up. Mannering gave a note to the cabby, and said, 'Wait for me, and watch anyone who comes out.'

Mannering's flat was on the second floor, and the lift was waiting. He stopped at his landing and hurried along to his flat. Either he was crazy, or . . .

He inserted the key and turned it slowly. Was he imagining things or could he hear a man's breathing behind the door?

Manering flung the door open, half expecting to see it bounce back at him and to hear an oath as it banged against the intruder. He was wrong; there was no one behind the door, but there was someone in the room.

'Well, well,' said the man from the other side, and Mannering swung round to find himself facing Mr. Jonathan Didcotte, who was standing in the doorway of the bathroom and holding an automatic pistol in his right hand.

Mannering said nothing for a moment; he was still too angry with himself and with Didcotte. He knew now that the idea which had sent him to the flat, the sudden suspicion that Didcotte was capable of breaking in and searching for the papers, had been justified. But he had not expected to find the American armed.

'Surely you're not upset,' murmured Didcotte, his smile as spontaneous as ever. 'By the way you flung that door back I should have thought you were expecting a visitor. You might shut it behind you.'

Mannering smiled with an effort and closed the door. He was in control of himself, and somehow he could not help a feeling that Didcotte was capable of using the gun.

'I expected you,' he admitted, and slipped his hand into his pocket. He saw the way Didcotte's hand tightened about the gun, and chuckled as he withdrew his cigarette case.

'You don't smoke, do you?'

‘No. Mannering, I hate to say this, but I’m a good shot.’

‘Our hangmen are good and punctual, too,’ flashed Mannering.

‘I’ve heard about them. And that reminds me; I’m sorry I was late at the Elan, Mannering. If you’d waited another twenty minutes I would have joined you.’

‘I don’t doubt it. Why don’t you put that gun away?’

‘I’ve an idea it might be useful.’

‘Between friends it’s hardly necessary.’

‘Friends?’ asked Jonathan Didcotte, raising his left eyebrow. He looked distinguished in his perfectly-cut evening clothes, the shoulders of which were padded and very square. He was wearing an opera-hat, and Mannering and he might have been taken for twins.

‘Why not?’ Mannering demanded. ‘I’m not thinking of telephoning the police. I’d like to hear more about this. And I can’t see why we shouldn’t finish our conversation. Unless you’d prefer a snack meal here?’

Jonathan Didcotte eyed the Baron for thirty seconds, reflectively and humorously. Then, to Mannering’s relief he pocketed his gun.

‘The Elan, I think,’ he said.

‘Good!’ Mannering was smiling. ‘By the way, are you here after those mysterious papers?’

‘I am.’

‘If I knew anything about them,’ said Mannering, with an easy smile, ‘I certainly wouldn’t keep them here. Before we go tell me who you think I am?’

‘The Baron,’ said Didcotte without hesitation.

‘Hm—mm. It’s a flattering idea, and I’ve a soft spot for the chap. I believe he did the job for me at Lobjoit’s, although my association with crime is chiefly for amusement. What made you think so?’

Didcotte drew a deep breath, and his eyes were narrowed.

‘I talked to Teevens after he’d lost my papers, and put two and two together.’

Mannering frowned.

‘That’s awkward,’ he said. ‘Both Teevens and you with the same fancy.’

‘I don’t make a habit of talking,’ flashed Didcotte.

‘But Teevens obviously does.’

‘I think that I rather frightened Teevens,’ Didcotte said. ‘While he had those papers he had me in a very awkward position. But now Teevens is on the spot.’

Mannering laughed and turned towards the door.

‘Teevens is having a bad time,’ he observed. ‘He’s a lousy specimen of a man, but don’t tell me he was thinking of blackmail?’

‘Those papers could gaol me for years. He’s been blackmailing me for a long time,’ said Jonathan Didcotte frankly. ‘Not for a great deal, fortunately. I’ve been in the States, of course, and one of my chief reasons for coming to England this year was to deal with Teevens.’

They seemed like close friends as they went into the lift and took the

waiting taxi. But if Mannering was keeping his end up he was also thinking hard. Didcotte certainly could be a tough customer, as certainly as he was likeable.

They reached the Elan at twenty-past eight. Henri, the head waiter, bowed towards Mannering and ushered him to a corner table. Mannering treated Henri as a master, and Henri treated Mannering as a gentleman – a perfect arrangement. Even Didcotte's insistence on soft drinks did not cause Henri to raise a speculative eyebrow. The trout that followed clear soup was delicious, the *poulet à la fricassée* perfect; the Elan had a Chateau Pliney that was just old enough to be superb.

Didcotte's presence gave it a piquancy.

Mannering's presence gave the Elan dining-room a piquancy to others, for a dozen women eyed him in various ways, among them Alice Vavasour, of the Lenville Theatre, who had once thought to make a conquest. Mannering knew that he was being discussed at a dozen tables, and that there was probably a great deal of speculation as to Didcotte's identity.

'You're popular,' Didcotte remarked.

'You've noticed it?'

'I'm surprised you've dared to dine with me.'

'You're not known to the police records, are you?'

'Yet?' said Didcotte speculatively. 'No.'

'Are you sure you won't have a liqueur?' Mannering changed the subject.

'Thanks – no; but you carry on.'

Henri brought a Benedictine and cigars, and raised both brows when Didcotte declined.

'You've something of a reputation as a gambler, haven't you?' Didcotte asked.

'That's true.'

'I've a proposition that might interest you,' said Didcotte. 'I need those papers, and . . .'

'I haven't got them.'

'Right,' said Didcotte. 'We'll compromise and say that you could get them if you put yourself out. Is that better?'

'A little.'

'That's good,' said Didcotte. 'Now, I've taken a little place in Surrey. The Towers, near Shere. Perhaps you know Addleman's old castle?'

'A *little* place?' retorted the Baron, who knew The Towers. 'Are you thinking of taking it down stone by stone and sending it back home?'

'It's an idea,' admitted Didcotte. 'But before I do that I'll be staying there for a couple of months. It has a keep, maybe you know?'

Mannering nodded, and his curiosity was at a higher pitch than ever. The Towers, near Shere, had once been the ancestral home of Lord Addleman, before he had lost his money at Monte Carlo. Mannering had been there once or twice, and he knew the keep, a dark, damp, eerie place, filled with shadows that the easily impressed called ghosts.

'In that keep,' smiled Jonathan Didcotte, 'I keep what jewels I have over

here. Or, more accurately, my wife's jewels.'

'You're married?' ejaculated Mannering, unable to stop himself.

Didcotte laughed.

'Do I look such a bachelor? Yes, I'm married. Mary is at The Towers now. She has a very good taste in stones.'

'Supposing you get to the point.'

'I will, right now. If the Baron can get into The Towers and steal Mary's stuff from the keep I'll just hope for the best about those papers. If he cared to try and failed, I would expect him to return them. That suggests a possible way out,' added Jonathan Didcotte. 'As for the jewels, Mary could get some more. They're insured, anyway,' added the American, with his soft laugh. 'Does it interest you?'

Mannering regarded the American in silence for twenty seconds. Didcotte saw the other's surprise disappear, saw that devil-may-care gleam in Mannering's eyes, saw his smile flash and knew the challenge had been accepted.

'It might interest the Baron,' said Mannering softly. 'Always providing he's got your papers, he stands to get the jewels and keep the papers, or to lose them both. Is that it?'

'And risk being caught,' added Didcotte. 'I'd do my best to stop him, naturally. I want those papers very badly. Is it a deal?'

'I think you can call it a deal. I'll be disappointed in the Baron if he turns it down. Are there any conditions?'

'Conditions?'

'On matters of arms and things?'

'I keep three menservants there, all ex-members of the New York police force,' smiled Jonathan Didcotte. 'And I have a notion that they're armed.'

'Only three?'

'I shall be there, of course.'

'You're not thinking of asking for police protection?'

'If the Baron can get past my three men and myself I deserve to lose,' said Didcotte.

The light in his eyes was lively, and the smile on his lips was of real humour. Mannering eyed him thoughtfully, and felt the same as he had a short while before at the flat. He liked this man.

'Yes, it's on,' he said. 'And now . . .'

'Hallo, John! I didn't expect you here tonight!' came the voice of Hugo Fauntley from Mannering's right, and Mannering made the necessary introductions. Fauntley was with a party including the Dowager Countess of Kenton.

Jonathan Didcotte told himself that Mannering could be relied upon to lose no time, and within five minutes of saying good night, he was telephoning The Towers.

His major-domo, by name Speel, answered the telephone.

'I'd like you to keep a very close watch on the keep tonight, Speel,' said Didcotte. 'Particularly before I arrive. You will not tell Mrs. Didcotte, you

understand.'

'May Mr. Guy know, sir?'

'Is Guy home?' asked Didcotte in surprise. Guy was his son, a likely youngster of twenty-two. 'No, don't tell him, but—er—you may answer any questions he cares to ask. I'll be back around two o'clock.'

Chapter Twelve

THE TOWERS

If the Baron had possessed no knowledge of The Towers, where Jonathan Didcotte and his family were to live for the next two months, he could not have started the job more quickly. But he knew the layout of the old castle fairly well. He also knew that in the library was a complete plan of the keep and the cells beneath it. His first intention was to get into the library, check up on those details and plans, and then start his raid on the keep.

He felt sure Didcotte had told the truth.

It might have been absurd, but Mannering gambled on the nature of Jonathan Didcotte. The greater gamble, of the papers against his failure, had a fine savour.

He reached the Bloom Street flat just before twelve. Twenty minutes later, without disguise but carrying his tool-kit, his silk scarf and a new automatic gas-pistol with a spare charge of ether-gas, he walked round to Shepherd's Market, where he garaged his car.

At that time he was running an M.G., just right for speed. He realised soon that he was being followed, and the face made him very thoughtful. It was just possible that Didcotte had already made advance arrangements to have him shadowed, but more likely Bristow had been at work.

Mannering knew that Bristow always worked methodically. There had been a time when the Bloom Street flat had been watched day and night, but after a few weeks in which the Baron had been inactive, manpower shortage had made Bristow call his watchdogs off. The raids in Hampshire and Bishopsgate were reason enough for Bristow to put them back again.

The car behind him was a red Morris-Cooper. Mannering spurted once or twice through the comparatively deserted streets, and the Morris kept pace easily.

Mannering increased his, and was moving across Barnes Common before twelve o'clock.

Normally he would have gone across Wimbledon Common to Kingston, and thence to Guildford, but it was too direct a route with a car on his tail. He touched seventy for a few seconds, then suddenly braked at a cross-road. The Mini-driver did not realise what he was doing, and pulled up within five yards. Mannering climbed out of his car.

The plain-clothes man at the wheel of the smaller car eyed him expectantly. There was another man next to him. Both were known to Mannering by sight as Bristow's men!

'I suppose you're not carrying a spare tin of petrol?' Mannering asked. 'I'm precious nearly out.'

'I think we can oblige, sir,' said the driver. 'Danny?'

His colleague got out and took a two-gallon tin of petrol from the back of

the police car. Mannering walked with him to the M.G. and saw him empty it.

'There you are, sir, glad to oblige.'

'That's ten shillings, near enough,' smiled Mannering, stepping back to the Mini and taking silver from his pocket. He separated four half-crowns from a collection of loose change, and then dropped the lot! Silver streamed in the road, shimmering in the lights.

'Blast it!' exclaimed Mannering, and Danny grunted. Mannering still behaved as though he had no idea these were policemen. He went down on his knees, muttering complaints about his carelessness without ceasing. Danny helped him obligingly, and the driver came to their aid. For five minutes they chased sixpences and shillings along the road, from under the Mini and the rear of the M.G. Mannering collected ten shillings at last, parted with it, and smiled his most cheerful smile.

'Thanks a lot,' he said; 'I hope I haven't detained you.'

He went back to the M.G. fully satisfied. The two-inch nails, which he always carried in the M.G., were already pushed half an inch into the two front tyres of the Mini, and at the first turn of the wheels they would dig in.

He rolled the M.G. into motion, making a flying start. The engine of the Mini hummed behind him, and the roar of a bursting tyre came.

The two tyres were punctured almost simultaneously. The Morris slithered across the road, on to the common. Mannering hurtled along the deserted common road, for he knew he had a twenty minutes' start, but would have to get rid of the M.G.

There was an all-night garage in Sheen, and the cheerful night attendant hurried to him.

'I'm having trouble, and I'm in a hurry,' said Mannering. 'Have you got a fast car I can borrow?'

'Got a nearly new Lea-Francis, sir, a snip at two 'unnered and forty. 'Ow long will yer want it for?' The attendant merged sales talk with hiring terms and a grin.

'Oh, I'll be back with it tomorrow,' said Mannering. 'Look over my engine for me, will you?'

'Oke,' said the attendant. 'I'll git you a chit, sir.'

He went into the office for a chit, and Mannering bent over the M.G., and removed two number plates. He had two sets on it, the top ones genuine, the bottom imaginary but with an Irish index. By the time the attendant arrived the top plates were in the back of the Lea-Francis, and Mannering was revving the engine. In less than ten minutes Mannering set off again.

Two swearing, sweating members of the C.I.D. were tramping across Barnes Common. They did more than suspect John Mannering, but they would have a difficult job to prove he had put the nails in the tyres.

There seemed something different, something menacing, about the medieval Towers as Mannering approached it, nearly two hours later, and surveyed the eight-foot granite wall that surrounded it.

The Lea-Francis was parked in a clear space behind some bushes, ten yards from the narrow road which led from the main road to The Towers. Mannering could reach it from the castle walls in five minutes.

He had no idea that Speel and the other two guards had been warned. He did not know that Guy Didcotte was at home, a youth already taller than his father, and a light heavyweight college champion. He was obsessed with one idea – accepting Didcotte's challenge and winning the duel.

It was a dark, moonless night, with the stars twinkling in the impenetrable heavens, a light wind whistling through the trees, the bushes and shrubs moving and rustling as the things of the night passed by. Once an owl hooted, and Mannering stopped dead still in his tracks.

He moved again, scoffing at his fears, but there was perspiration on his forehead, with the same quickening beat of his heart, the same tight smile on his lips, as at the start of every job. It was not exactly fear; it was a tenseness that arose from knowing that if he failed he would find himself behind bars for a long time.

The meadows near the castle muffled his footsteps, but if that was an advantage the high wall, and beyond it the stark outlines of the old building, seemed sinister and menacing. Nothing moved but an occasional bat, jerking on a wild, meaningless zigzag, leaping out of the gloom in front of his face. Mannering suffered more from nerves in the five minutes' walk from the copse where he had left his car than he had done all the time at Teevens's house.

The brooding quiet of the place, the loneliness and the situation, high up amid the Surrey hills, which looked so towering and menacing in the darkness, all added to the tension.

He knew that the library was on the south side of The Towers, and reached the small door in the south wall. He tried the handle; if it was unlocked, it would be a help.

It was not, and he had no desire to try conclusions with the lock, for as it was locked it would probably be barred and he saw at a glance that there was no way he could get a file through the bolts.

But there was an easier way into the castle grounds.

Fitted to his tool-kit, a roll that went right round his waist and was eight inches wide, was a twenty foot length of knotted rope. In another section of the kit was a double hook, and he looped it to the rope.

He was standing two yards away from the wall. His mask was pulled up, his hat – a black trilby for this occasion – pulled well down over his eyes. Hardly a glimpse of white skin was visible, for his hands were covered with dark blue fabric gloves with thin rubber fingertips. Mannering hardly realised he was wearing them, for they fitted closely yet comfortably, to his hands and fingers.

He judged the distance, and threw the hooked end up. It sailed a couple of yards over the wall, and dropped clear on the other side.

The wall was ridged, not rounded off, although the top of it was spiked. On the spikes depended Mannering's big hope; the hook should catch on to

one.

He heard the thud as the rubber-covered hook hit against the far side, and then pulled gently at the rope. It came through his fingers slowly, and he felt resistance as the hook struck an obstacle. He tugged harder, and the rope would not budge. Then he went five yards back, and leaned back with all his weight, but the hook was lodged firmly.

He began to smile behind his mask, and the fears of the past five minutes were gone. He was no longer John Mannering, but the Baron in action.

He hauled himself up on the rope, getting purchase above each knot, reached the top quickly, and saw how firmly the hook was caught. As he unhooked the rope and dropped it into the grounds he crouched low to prevent his silhouette showing against the sky.

He wanted to take the rope with him, and the spikes were more help than hindrance. He gripped one in each hand, lowered himself down the wall, and turned the eight-foot drop into one of a few inches. He could not even see the rope, less than two yards from his eyes. But he found and picked it up quickly, coiling it round his waist. The darkness and the silence seemed unnatural, almost as if it were forced, as if there was a trap that he could not see.

He went on warily, calling on his recollection of The Towers. The library was on the ground floor and Addleman had built larger windows for it some years before. A thought passed through Mannering's mind: that Jonathan Didcotte was much more likely to give The Towers the dignity that they deserved than the younger scion of a line that could trace its history back to the days of William the Conqueror.

Mannering stopped thinking about it as he neared the wall of The Towers itself.

Between the surrounding wall and the building was a stretch of ground, perhaps fifty yards across. Although it was grassed for the most part, there were flower-beds and shrubberies dotted here and there. A lawn stretched right up to the library windows.

Mannering reached the large mullioned windows in which the formation of a Norman arch had been retained in the alteration. The sill of the window was only three feet from the ground, but the bottom half was covered with thick wire.

The Baron took the tool-kit off his waist. He stuffed various items in his pockets one after another. His torch, wire-cutters, a pair of pincers, a small file, a screwdriver, and a small jemmy, the latter the most essential yet the most cumbersome tool in his kit. Only his right pocket had no tool, he wanted no hindrance if he had to grab his gun.

The wire-cutters came into action first.

The Baron was working quickly, his movements as delicate and decisive as those of a surgeon. Strand after strand of the thick, painted wire snapped. The snapping seemed to echo through the darkness, but the sound was negligible, and he did not pause.

The wire was cut down both sides at last. Mannering bent it over so that

he could get a clear view of the glass, and had to use his torch. He needed luck, with the window open. But it was closed tightly and the catch was set. He wished he could have toured the house to find an easier entrance, but before he started roaming round The Towers, with its passages and staircases, its many huge rooms and its keep, he wanted to have the plan firmly in his mind.

A clock bell boomed two sonorous notes as Mannering smeared one side of a foot-square paper quickly with Seccotine from a large tube, and pasted it on to the glass. Next he took the jemmy and smashed at the paper.

There was a dull *crack*! and streaks seemed to leap into the uncovered part of the window. The Baron pulled the paper away, carrying with it a dozen small pieces of glass and leaving a hole nearly large enough for him to put his hand through. He pulled one or two more pieces out, and then groped around for the catch.

Whether The Towers was fitted with an alarm system or not he could not be sure. He tested the window for wires, found none, located the catch, and eased it backward. No clamour disturbed the silence. He pushed the window up slowly, and the squeaking of it seemed loud and bound to attract attention.

But no other sound came.

He paused for a moment in the darkness, the whispering of the wind in the trees coming clearly, suggesting a hundred things. Then he relaxed and climbed through the window. A thick carpet was almost flush with the walls, and there was no need to worry about making a noise with his heels.

There was still the chance that the guards would patrol the grounds and see the broken window, but Mannering was hoping for the best – and in one respect his hopes were justified. Speel and his henchmen were guarding the keep, waiting for Didcotte's return and an explanation of the telephone warning, while the American was on the road from London.

Chapter Thirteen

THE DIDCOTTE JEWELS

Mannering pulled the curtains across the library window and saw that they were thick and opaque; he could safely switch on a reading-lamp. He used his torch as he moved cautiously about the room, located the lamp and searched the book-lined walls for the history of Addleman Towers.

It was with a row of other historical books, a heavy, calf-bound volume. Mannering took it from the shelf to a table near by and switched on a reading-lamp. In the surrounding darkness he could almost imagine that he was in his own home. Subconsciously he was alert, but he was studying a plan of The Towers keenly. He took a pencil and a sheet of paper from his pocket and traced the lines. It was always easier for him to remember a plan when he'd drawn it, just as he could always remember names and words he had once written down.

A study of maps and architectural drawing had been one of his earliest tasks after starting the career of daring and cracksmanship that had now grown part of him, was essential to him. He could carry a plan of a building in his mind's eye and turn one way or the other within the place with as much certainty as if it was as familiar as his own flat or the Elan.

His plan was rough, but effective enough.

The library door opened out into a passage that went right round the ground floor of The Towers. Another passage led from it, and from this opened the doors of the arms-room and the billiard-room. At the end of the passage was a short flight of stairs, with a door at the bottom. Through that door another narrow passage and the main door of the keep.

The distance from the library to the keep door was some fifty yards, and he could get from one place to the other in seconds.

There were three doors from the library, one leading to the passage, one to the morning-room (as it had been in Addleman's days), the other to the vast hall. Mannering took the heavy, morticed lock out of the library door in less than thirty seconds, wielding the screwdriver like an expert craftsman. Now the door could not be locked against him. The one leading to the left – the morning-room – was open, but the morning-room passage door was locked.

He wondered why the library door to the passage had been unlocked, but gifts from the gods could not be ignored. Another thirty seconds passed before he had opened the morning-room door.

He decided to take that lock out quickly. The more ways of escape the better in this rabbit warren. Two of the screws were stubborn, and Mannering began to sweat. He was working in the darkness, relying on his sense of touch. But he finished at last and put the lock down.

Then clearly through the silence came the sound of a footfall.

He straightened up and slipped behind the partly open door, hardly daring to breathe. The footfalls were drawing nearer, heavy and deliberate.

He heard the man cough. He heard him pause, and try the handle of the door next to the morning-room.

He would find the missing lock next.

Mannering opened the door swiftly and stepped softly into the passage. He saw the bull's-eye lamp that the guard was using, making a round circle of light on the next door. He took three quick steps forward before the guard turned round. The Baron could see only his coat and the buttons shining on it in the reflected glow from the torch.

Then the beam shone on Mannering.

The guard opened his lips as thirteen stone of bone and sinew thwacked into him. He tried to cry out, but a hand gripped his windpipe. He reeled backward, waving his arms helplessly as something very cold was pressed against his forehead.

'Keep still, or you're a dead man.'

He did not struggle. Mannering put the mouth of his gas-pistol against his nose, and pressed the trigger. The gas hissed out; the guard drew a deep breath and then slumped down, a heavy weight in Mannering's arms. Mannering lowered him to the floor, and then carried him quickly back into the library. He was back in the passage secure in the knowledge that the man patrolling that part of The Towers would not worry him, but he wondered where and how often the guards contacted with each other.

He could find out . . . and he was less than twenty yards from the keep!

There was no door from the main passage to the smaller one that led to the keep. Mannering turned left into it, and sped along. He was going silently, his ears strained, his teeth set. In his right hand was the ether gas-pistol with two more charges.

He reached the steps leading to the keep itself. Beyond that door was another circular passage that ran about the keep, and there were three other ways of approaching it. There might be someone on the other side, a guard there night and day, and if the door was locked it would cause trouble.

Mannering used his torch to examine the thick oak door and the lock. It was anything but modern, and would take him no more than a few seconds if the door was unbolted.

He switched the light off and took out his pick-lock. He pushed it into the keyhole, and then suddenly his tension eased, for the key was in the lock.

A year ago that might have worried him; but now it was easy to tackle and safe. He took a miniature oilcan from his vest-pocket and squirted oil along the keyhole. Then he produced a small, round pair of pincers, a French tool whose jaws, when closed, made a barrel-shape. He manoeuvred it slowly, forcing the barrel over the key. He judged he had a grip of over an inch before he tightened the pincers and, moving quickly, turned the key to the right.

It moved without a squeak. The lock clicked back and Mannering gripped

the handle and turned it. The door opened a fraction of an inch on its well-oiled hinges.

Then Mannering had a bad shock.

There was a light in the passage surrounding the keep. He stopped dead still. No sound came of footsteps or of men breathing, but if the light was on he could be sure that the keep would be visited every so often during the night.

He was below the floor level of The Towers, and the silence seemed even more profound, but the door squealed as he pushed it wider open. Any moment Mannering was prepared for further trouble, any moment he expected a voice to come out of the darkness.

Nothing came.

The door was wide open, and Mannering stepped through into the stone passage. There was no carpet on the floors, and the least sound echoed eerily round the heavy granite walls.

Mannering slipped the key of the door into his pocket, and glanced up at the bolts. There were three, each screwed into the oak. The way out when he had finished must be straightforward all the way, so he unscrewed the bolts, and put them close against the wall.

Now he could afford to look round.

The thrill of being in here was tremendous. He was within a couple of yards of the keep door, a massive thing of wrought iron, and within three yards of Didcotte's jewels.

What was his best plan? To start on the door, or look about the passage?

He determined on the latter quickly, and pressed himself against the wall of the keep, flattening his hands and going along crab-fashion. He had moved five yards when very clearly came a muffled sneeze!

Mannering was creeping towards the light, and his gas-pistol was outstretched. He went along inches at a time until suddenly he caught a glimpse of a man.

He was sitting with his back to the keep wall, facing two of the doors into the passage. His white handkerchief fluttered and he was trumpeting like a sick elephant. Mannering's eyes glinted as he jumped forward.

His gas-pistol was ready, the job looked easy, but at the last moment his plans went awry.

The man turned. For a second he stared in stupefaction at the Baron. Then his right hand flashed towards his pocket, and he dodged to one side. The gas hissed out, passing his head, and Mannering knew he was within an ace of being shot. He went straight forward, crashing his right fist into the man's stomach. The gun, half out of the guard's pocket, flew from his hands as he staggered back.

Mannering dived for the gun, caught it a couple of inches from the floor and straightened up. If the gun had hit the floor it would almost certainly have gone off. The sound of a shot in that confined space would have echoed throughout the ground floor and upstairs.

The guard was recovering from that blow in the stomach. He had banged

against the wall and staggered back. Now he lurched forward. It was impossible to use the gas-pistol. Mannering clenched his fist and drove it into the guard's face. The man gasped and thudded into the wall again. His head gave a sickening thud and he sank down.

Behind his mask Mannering's expression was very tense.

He took some adhesive tape from his kit and stuck up the man's lips. Thin cord bound his ankles and wrists. Mannering made sure he was not seriously hurt, and straightened up.

Now there was only one guard left – unless Didcotte had lied. Mannering turned towards the keep door. Suddenly he snapped his fingers and made a complete turn-about, for the guard might have keys.

He bent over the man and went through his pockets. His fingers hit against cold metal. He drew the thing out and stared down at the key in his hand hardly able to believe his eyes.

The key?

The Baron swung round again and reached the keep door. He slipped the key in silently, for the lock was well-oiled, and turned. The lock went back!

The Baron came nearer to laughing aloud than he had done all the night. He pushed the door open a couple of inches.

And his inclination to chuckle disappeared, for there was a brilliant light inside the keep: and something else.

Crack!

The shot came with a devastating suddenness, smashing against the door. Mannering caught a glimpse of a tall, bulky man with a gun in his hand, standing by the wall. He pulled the door to with a crash as the second shot came.

The door was still quivering, and the guard could not have moved two yards when Mannering flung it open again. As he did so he bent double. A third bullet whistled past.

Mannering threw his pistol as he charged.

It was the last thing the guard expected, and the aim was good. The guard dodged to one side, a bullet wasted itself in the floor, and next moment Mannering was on his man.

They met with a thud and both went down, the guard rolling, kicking, swearing, the Baron fighting to get at his gun hand. Twice the man jerked it away; twice Mannering grabbed his wrist again and bent it backward.

They were fighting desperately, evenly matched for strength, but Mannering was pressing hard against his opponent's body. The man was trying to knee him, but Mannering's pressure was remorseless. Slowly the man's right wrist went back, the fingers loosened.

The guard was gasping with pain, but Didcotte had known what he was about when he had engaged Speel. But that dreadful pressure was unbearable; Speel felt as if his wrist would crack. Suddenly he let go, and the automatic dropped to the floor.

Mannering drew his left arm back and jabbed his fist to Speel's jaw.

Nine men out of ten could not have connected as suddenly in that

cramped position. Mannering had all the Mendor Club training and the experience of a dozen rough houses behind him. Speel's head jerked back. He grunted once, and his eyes rolled. Mannering had no need to ask himself whether the other was feigning unconsciousness or not.

He stood up slowly, breathing hard, and for a moment his brain whirled. He rested against the wall until his head grew easier.

He looked about him and saw the safe in the wall, and knew that it could be opened in a few seconds with gelignite – he could afford to use explosives now. He started to work, but before he lit a thirty-second fuse he drew Speel's unconscious body to one corner, and crouched down himself. The seconds seemed to drag, but the *boom* of the explosion came at last. There was a flash of yellow flame, a billow of smoke, an acrid smell in the Baron's nostrils. But as the smoke cleared away he saw the safe door hanging open.

Had Didcotte told the truth? Were the jewels there?

Mannering knew the answer ten seconds later – when a world of beauty lay before him. He had never dreamed there would be such a collection. Diamonds, rubies and sapphires in profusion, pendants and tiaras, necklets and bracelets, brooches and rings! There must be half-a-million pounds' worth.

He stared at the glittering array for a long time, hardly able to believe his eyes. In the bright light of the electric lamp in the ceiling, he saw that every one of them was a genuine stone.

He laughed aloud as he began to stuff the jewels in his capacious pocket. The safe was cleared in less than a minute, and the Baron turned round.

And then he stared, transfixed.

There was a man in the doorway, a youngster little more than twenty, very much like Jonathan Didcotte, but without that man's broken nose. His clear eyes were narrowed, his lips set. He spoke between them, and the gun in his right hand spoke with him.

'Put your hands over your head. Take off your mask, first.'

Chapter Fourteen

THE WORD OF JONATHAN DIDCOTTE

The Baron put his hands up very slowly.

It was the only thing to do; but as he stared at the fresh-faced youngster his mind was working quickly, and he was estimating his chances of making a rush. That the other was young had its advantages, but he was looking very grim, and the gun in his hand did not waver.

'The mask. Didn't you hear me?'

'Sorry,' said Mannering, and actually chuckled, to the youngster's surprise. 'Yes, I heard, but I'm not obliging you.'

'Have you ever been shot?' enquired the youngster, whose American accent was quite distinguishable.

'Yes – in circumstances very much like these. I got away.'

Young Didcotte's lips parted in a reluctant smile.

'Maybe you did, but you won't get away this time.'

'Maybe I won't,' said the Baron. He stared at the youngster, his arms were still stretched above his head; young Didcotte had no idea of the way his heart was thumping, his blood racing, his mind searching desperately for a way of escape. The Baron was afraid of the outcome of this, yet he looked cool and his voice sounded casual.

'You'd better be sensible,' said the other. 'I don't like shooting a defenceless man.'

'Have you seen the wreckage tonight?'

'Yes.' Didcotte snapped the word. 'Now, that's enough talk. Take off your mask.'

Mannering began to see a way out although he would need luck to use it – luck and a belief in young Didcotte being cast in his father's mould. He had a job to keep his voice steady, but his eyes still smiled.

'Didcotte, I know your father . . .'

'That makes you even more of a heel.'

'In a way, perhaps. Supposing I tell you that he knew I was coming?'

For the first time Guy Didcotte smiled as if he meant it.

'I know he did. He telephoned to Speel and warned him.'

'Did he mention names?'

'He just told him to be careful.'

'That's why you're up and about?'

'I came home unexpectedly this afternoon,' added Guy, with a grin. 'I didn't expect to have this kind of fun. But stop gabbing, and take that mask off.'

'Will you make a promise if I take the mask off?' asked Mannering mildly.

'No!'

'Simply promise to consult your father before sending for the police.'

For a moment Guy Didcotte hesitated. His tone was uncertain when he did answer, as if this was more than he had bargained for.

'I phoned the police at Guildford when I found Halloran knocked out upstairs. I . . .'

'Did you, by God!' snapped the Baron, and he chose that moment to take a desperate chance.

The realisation that the police were coming, the knowledge that his chances of escape were negligible, made him fling caution and badinage to the winds.

Didcotte saw him coming and touched the trigger of his gun, but Mannering swerved to the right and the bullet hummed past. Before the second came, he found Didcotte's stomach with a straight left. The lad's chin jerked up and connected with Mannering's right fist. Didcotte slumped down; it was over as quickly as that.

The Baron raced through the open door of the keep, towards the door that led to the library. The door opened easily, and he leaped up the stone stairs, through the passage, into the library, with the door gaping open.

The window was still wide open. Mannering climbed out of it, dropped on to the soft turf and sprinted for the wall, unwinding the rope at his waist as he went. His breath was coming in quick, short gasps, and it was all he could do to hurl the rope up. It failed to catch the first time.

He tried again, and the hook gripped, but he was slower getting to the top of the wall. He did not wait to unhook the rope, but lowered himself quickly. He fell as he reached the ground and rolled over, breathless.

He reached his feet again, staggering towards his car. His sense of direction was good, and at last he reached the Lea-Francis, his legs so weary that they would hardly carry him. He took a sip from a whisky flask before starting the engine. It ticked over and the car moved across bumpy ground towards the road. The Baron turned left, knowing that he had to drive for half a mile along a narrow lane. He reached the main road without meeting a soul, breathing more easily and telling himself that he could still get through. But he knew that every car the police met would be stopped, and the jewels were like burning coals in his pockets.

He turned left towards London at the junction with the main road, and the speedometer needle touched seventy. He dared not go far at that speed, and he felt his heart turn over when for the first time he saw the broad beams of a car's headlights, perhaps a mile in front of him.

The police?

There was a good chance of that, so he decided to swing off the road at the first opportunity.

There was a narrow lane a hundred yards farther on, and Mannering backed into it. He switched off the lights and waited at the wheel of the car, while the headlights of the oncomer spread a white glow about the countryside.

Now he could hear the powerful engine. He waited on tenterhooks. If it was a police car he was all right for the time being.

Then he gasped, for a car flashed by in the opposite direction, using only its wing-lights! He caught a glimpse of peak-capped men, and knew that the hunt was on!

He heard the big car stop less than a hundred yards away from the lane. Desperately anxious to do something, he left the Lea-Francis and crept to the corner.

In the headlights of the big car he saw three men, two in uniform, one in evening dress. He could hear the mutter of their voices, but could catch none of the words. Suddenly the man in evening dress turned, and Mannering saw him clearly.

Didcotte on his way back from London!

On that instant, Mannering reached a decision. He knew that when the police learned of the violence at The Towers and the size of the robbery they would have every available man scouring the neighbourhood. The chances of a getaway now were a thousand to one against the Baron.

The policemen saluted and climbed back into their car. Mannering hear the engine start and saw the red tail-light move before Didcotte's car started again. It travelled slowly at first, giving Mannering the only chance there was.

He stepped out into the road in front of the car, waving his arms. If there was a chauffeur, the chance was lost already.

Didcotte was alone.

The American pulled up frowning until suddenly he recognised Mannering, and he looked astounded. The car jolted to a standstill, and for a few seconds Didcotte gaped. As Mannering drew up to the window the American gulped: 'Mannering!'

'The job's done,' Mannering said. 'And the police are on the trail.'

'You've actually been to The Towers?' Didcotte's voice was hoarse. 'They said there'd been a robbery, but I couldn't believe it was you.'

'But for the unknown factor, your son. I'd be clear away. And so . . .'

'And so what?' asked Jonathan Didcotte.

'In my opinion I've won that wager,' said Mannering. 'I've been in, and I've come out. If you doubt it . . .'

He slipped his hand into his pocket as he spoke and drew out the first jewel that came into his hand. It sparkled like a living fire in the side-lights of the big car.

'So what?' repeated Didcotte, as if he hadn't heard a word.

'I think it would be a good idea,' Mannering went on. 'if you took me back to The Towers as an expected guest, don't you?'

He waited on tenterhooks, wondering whether he should have taken his chance with the police. He had just robbed the man of a fortune, and now he was asking for his help!

'Er—Mannering,' said Jonathan Didcotte. He opened the car door and got out. 'I didn't know Guy would be home. You haven't hurt him, have you?'

'No.'

'Come back and stay the night,' invited Jonathan Didcotte.

‘He was a man about your build, Mr. Mannering, but not so tall,’ said Guy Didcotte excitedly. ‘Does he pack his punch!’

‘He certainly found one for you,’ conceded Mannering.

‘You’d better go up to bed,’ said Jonathan Didcotte easily. ‘I’m going now. We can’t do anything more; the police are searching the countryside, and Speel’s all right, you say, as well as the others?’

‘They’re all right, but Speel’s pretty mad,’ said Guy Didcotte.

‘I’ll bet he is! I suppose I’d better go and calm your mother. Mannering, a nightcap before you go to your room? I’m sorry to have brought you into trouble like this.’

‘I wouldn’t call it trouble for me,’ said Mannering drily. ‘I’d be glad of a whisky-and-soda.’

‘Guy’ll look after you,’ said Didcotte. He still seemed dazed, as if the shock of the robbery affected him. ‘I’ll see you in the morning and we’ll chat about our little deal.’

Mannering nodded. Guy Didcotte found him a whisky-and-soda, and seemed disposed to talk for the rest of the night, until Mannering yawned pointedly.

‘I guess you’re tired, sir. Your room is next to mine, so I’ll see you up. Did you bring a case?’

‘I came down on the spur of the moment,’ said Mannering.

‘Dad’s always catching folk on the hop,’ remarked Guy. ‘I’ll be glad to fix you up.’

After lunch on the following day, Mannering left The Towers. He had talked with Didcotte, although the American had been busy with the police. Young Guy had developed something suspiciously like hero-worship for Mannering. His father, after promising a tearful wife the world, eyed his son thoughtfully.

‘You put up a good show, son; don’t let it worry you because you lost. You sure you didn’t get a look at this man’s face?’

‘No. He rather implied you knew him,’ answered Guy.

‘The gentleman cracksman, eh? Well, the stuff was insured, so we’re not going to worry too much if the police have no luck.’

Didcotte saw Mannering off, and went back to his study. He was still worried by the papers. Teevens had sent enough of them to show that Didcotte’s millions were not altogether free from taint. That fact itself did not worry Didcotte, for he held a theory that all money made on Wall Street or the Stock Exchange – for that matter on the Bourse or a dozen other markets – had the same taint, and his winnings over the Krugen and Raviky affairs were as clean as most.

The law would think differently, and he dared not let Teevens make any disclosures.

Two days after the robbery at The Towers the newspaper headlines were quietening down, and even the insurance company was beginning to admit that it would be impossible to get any of the stones back. On the same

morning Didcotte received a registered letter.

He was alone in the library when it came, and he slit it open carefully, frowning as he did so. There was something bulky in it.

Cotton-wool. *Jewels!*

Didcotte stared at the diamonds, the rubies and the sapphires – mostly in rings and pendants – that were glittering and winking up at him. Then he stared at the note in block lettering and signed 'The Baron'. He read it a dozen times:

These look like personal items your wife would probably like back. If I were you I'd burn these papers.

Jonathan Didcotte's lips puckered as he drew out the incriminating documents and figures that Gus Teevens had managed to obtain twelve months before.

Deputy Commander Lynch, of Scotland Yard, closed the Assistant Commissioner's door with a decided snap, and stalked along to Bristow's office.

Lynch was a large, untidy man with an invariable dusting of cigarette ash down his right coat lapel. He was a man with a good reputation, a stolid, occasionally droll detective who took his work seriously and yet found time to laugh at it. He was not laughing that afternoon, however; nor was Bristow.

Bristow was sprucer than ever, and the carnation in his buttonhole was a joy to see. But he looked glum when he saw Lynch.

'He's let you have it?'

'Bill,' said Superintendent Lynch gloomily, 'I've had some rough passages in my time, but none like this. We've got to get the Baron. The A.C. says—well, damn what the A.C. says, but we've got to get Mannering.'

Bristow's eyes were hard.

'I'm trying all I know. His flat is searched after every big job, and we've found nothing. How he managed to get Didcotte to put him up that night, I don't know.'

'Try and find out,' urged Lynch.

He also knew that Mannering was the Baron, but neither of them could prove it. They had no corroborative evidence; they had never succeeded in trapping Mannering into an admission, and they had kept their knowledge to themselves, without even making a note of their suspicions on the records. The Chief Commissioner was a good friend of John Mannering's, and they had to be careful.

'Where's Tanker?' Lynch asked.

'Watching the Bloom Street flat.'

'Send Morgan to relieve him. I'd like to talk to Tanker.'

Detective Sergeant Tanker Tring, a tall, thin man, with a love of large bowlers under which he could tuck his jug ears, and a taste for bright brown shoes, entered the Deputy Commissioner's office some forty-five minutes

later. Bristow followed and shut the door.

Tanker Tring, whose nickname had been earned because of his invariably slow but crushing progress on those cases which he handled with Bristow, looked gloomy. 'You sent for me, sir?'

'Why the hell would you come here if I hadn't?' demanded Lynch. 'Tring, you've been watching Mr. Mannering on and off for how long?'

'Eight months, sir.'

'And you've a complete record of his habits?'

'Yessir.'

'Let's have it.'

Tring proceeded to recite a statement of John Mannering's activities over the past eight months with a mechanical thoroughness which would have alarmed Mannering. Tanker talked rather like a gramophone record, but Lynch knew a good report when he heard one.

'Very thorough, Tring. That's good. Now it seems to me he's got four regular ports of call. The Elan Hotel . . .'

'Reg'lar, sir.'

'His flat.'

'Reg'lar.'

'Mendor's.'

'Pretty often, Mr. Lynch.'

'And Piccadilly Circus Station.'

Tanker Tring nodded, and scratched his hair. 'Funny about that, sir. He goes there once or twice a week when the Baron's busy, but I can never find him. I 'ad three men with me once, watching for him, and he slipped us. He's a dark one, is Mr. Mannering. I hang about the gents' there something cruel sometimes. Could 'a swore he went in. but he don't come out.'

Lynch tapped the end of a pencil.

'He loses you there, does he? Ever see anyone else come out – regular, Tring?'

'*What's* that, Mr. Lynch?'

'Have you ever seen the same man come from the cloakroom?'

'Caw!' gasped Tanker Tring. 'There's an old codger about fifty, I reckon – who *offen* comes out. He carries a suitcase, too.'

Lynch stood up, and there was a light of hope in his eyes and in Bristow's.

'You'll be a sergeant all your life if you don't wake up to things like that,' Lynch said. 'A middle-aged man with a case, which might contain Mannering's clothes.'

'But he's fifteen years older'n Mr. Mannering!'

'Go back to Mannering's flat, and the next time he disappears at Piccadilly station telephone for me and Mr. Bristow. Is that understood?'

'Perfectly, sir,' said Tanker Tring, and retreated like a puppy denied a bone.

Lynch regarded Bristow eagerly.

'If I'm not in when Tring's call comes through, have half a dozen of the best plain-clothes men round that station. If six or seven of you follow this

old man of Tring's you might learn something. Mannering's got a hideout somewhere.'

Bristow nodded, feeling almost hopeful.

And as Bristow left the Deputy Commissioner's office, Mannering was looking out of the window at the plain-clothes man who had relieved Tring, and was deciding that it was time he worked the quick-change act from Mannering to Mr. Mayle – at Piccadilly Circus station – and spent a day or two at Wimbledon.

The Didcotte jewels were in Mrs. Jenson's care, although she did not know it.

Chapter Fifteen

BRISTOW COUNTS HIS CHICKENS

As Mannering left his flat he saw the plain-clothes man outside, and he found the same man at Piccadilly Circus ten minutes later. He resisted a temptation to wink at the detective and slipped into the cloakroom with a large brown suitcase in his hand. He collected a blue one of similar size from the cloakroom assistant before changing. It was empty, but he wanted to make sure it could not be recognised by the waiting policeman when he left the cloakroom in the guise of Mr. Mayle, and thus arouse suspicion.

It took only a few minutes to change into the Mayle clothes, which were in the case he had brought with him. Then he put the 'Mannering' suit into it and stood it aside, ready for the attendant. He would collect it and reverse the change later. The padded suit of Mr. Mayle, with narrow-cut trousers, helped to give a false impression of his height.

Then came the more ticklish part of the job.

Mannering had taken lessons with several experts on the art of make-up, but he rarely felt too confident. First he used a pair of rubber cheek-pads, giving his face a transfiguring fullness; next he brilliantined his hair, brushing it from the parting to the right, instead of straight back from the forehead.

In a small pocket mirror, used for the transformation, he studied the effect. A touch of grease-paint beneath his eyes made them seem pouchy; a line or two at his lips and chin altered the set of his face surprisingly. He dabbed rouge on either cheek, rubbing it well in to make him look fresh-complexioned and nothing like John Mannering.

'I'm improving,' he told himself as he began to put three small rubber casings over the teeth at the side of his mouth. He worked the casings down carefully, and then smiled into the mirror. His perfect teeth were marred by three that looked brown and discoloured.

The shirt-sleeved attendant grunted when the brown case took its turn for storage. Mannering tipped him sixpence – as much as Mr. Mayle would be likely to give – and left the cloakroom with the blue case in his hand.

The policeman was still outside.

So was Tanker Tring and three other plain-clothes men, while Bristow was lurking in a telephone kiosk which gave him a good view of the cloakroom entrance. Mannering did not see them, he had no suspicion of their presence.

Bristow saw the case and realised it was a different colour from that which Mannering had taken in. That was one of the things that decided Bristow not to act there and then.

Mannering made no attempt to conceal himself. The plain-clothes man who had followed him from the flat was standing near the cloakroom

looking bored, and took no notice when the plump man passed. Mannering told himself that there was no need to worry about the police.

As usual when acting Mr. Mayle, he took a train to Putney Bridge station. A Yard man who had never before worked on the Baron case followed him overheard his destination and booked to Wimbledon.

Behind them came Tring and Bristow, and two other plain-clothes men unknown to Mannering. The net was closing, while Mannering remained quite oblivious.

Bristow left the booking to Tring and hurried down the escalators and steps. He saw his portly quarry turning towards the Piccadilly line. Mannering took up his position near the middle of the platform, next to the Yard man whose ticket took him to Wimbledon. Mannering caught no glimpse of Bristow and Tring at the far end of the platform, hiding behind two automatic machines and a waste-bin. The train rumbled into the station; Mannering and the nearest detective entered the carriage, two Yard men hurried to the front of the train, while Bristow and Tring took the last smoker.

Tanker Tring, a man who rarely showed emotion, was looking as solemn as ever. Bristow was congratulating himself, and very close to elation.

'I think we've got him, Tanker; we've got him this time!'

'Maybe we have,' said Tanker Tring cautiously.

'Don't be a Jonah,' growled Bristow.

Tring went to the door at each station, looking along the platform and making sure the portly man did not slip out without being seen. At Earl's Court he beckoned Bristow, and they left the train. Mannering alias Mayle was going towards the escalators and the District Line, passing the time of day with the Yard man who had booked to Wimbledon.

That astute detective said, among other things, that he collected butterflies. Mannering knew nothing about butterflies and the Yard man realised he could safely discuss them. He created the impression that he was a fanatical collector, and to Mannering he seemed pleasant and harmless.

At Putney Bridge Mannering left the train without recognising the two policemen walking in front of him, without seeing Bristow and Tring following him. The collector of butterflies said goodbye, waited in the carriage until Mannering had disappeared down the steps and then jumped from the moving train.

'He lives near Wimbledon Common,' he snapped to Bristow.

'Get anything else?'

'Says he's a travelling representative, but won't say what for.'

'All right,' said Bristow. 'You come with us.'

By this time Mannering was standing in the approach to Putney Bridge station, waiting for a bus. When one lumbered up, he boarded it quickly. The two Yard men who had preceded him went to the top deck, while Bristow signalled urgently to the only cab waiting at the station.

The cabby was old but intelligent.

'I want that bus followed,' Bristow said. 'Do you know its route?'

‘Oh, yes,’ said the old one. ‘Up the hill, acrorst the Common . . .’

‘Let it overtake you before it gets to Wimbledon Common, and then follow it.’ Bristow waited a strategic moment before he added the magic word ‘Police!’

The bus started out of the station approach two minutes after the cab. Ten minutes later, half-way up Putney Hill, the cabby allowed the bus to pass him. Bristow saw the portly man sitting in the back seat. He was itching to use the handcuffs. For over a year the Baron had been burning his fingers, and now it looked as though Bristow had a chance of lighting the match himself.

When he saw the portly man get off the bus opposite a medium-sized detached house backing on to Wimbledon Common, Bristow left the car a hundred yards along the road, with Tanker Tring and the butterfly collector. The two Yard men in the bus alighted a minute later, and the house was being approached from both sides.

Mannering disappeared into the drive of The Grove.

He noticed the cab, but there were several large houses near by, and cabs were by no means unusual just there. A glance right and left told him there was no one he knew in sight, and when he caught a glimpse of Mrs. Jenson, outlined against a second-floor window, he smiled and waved. She hurried downstairs and was panting cheerfully when she opened the door.

‘Why, Mr. Mayle, sir! I didn’t expect you – that I didn’t!’

‘I hardly expected myself,’ chuckled Mr. Mayle. ‘But I dare hope you’ll be able to find me some lunch.’

‘Oh, I’ll manage that, sir, but I’ll have to pop out for some chops. Shall I go now?’

‘As soon as you like,’ said Mr. Mayle.

She fetched a hat and coat and hurried out of the house, waving frantically to stop a bus. The bus pulled up, Mannering glanced out of the hall window, and saw the housekeeper scrambling on to the step. Still he did not see Bristow and Tring, for they were hidden by the red monster. He went upstairs whistling with good spirits, opened the blue case and spread the Didcotte jewels on the coverlet.

It was difficult to assess their value, but Mannering told himself they gave him the best haul he had ever made. The insurance companies would probably have to pay Didcotte forty thousand pounds out on them, which meant that Mannering should get fifteen thousand at the least, with a reasonable chance of reaching twenty-five.

‘Most satisfactory,’ said Mr. Mayle to Mannering.

And then he looked out of the window, every muscle in his body rigid.

For Bristow and Sergeant Tanker Tring were walking along the short drive towards the house.

Mannering was appalled. He had been confident that he had made the change-over successfully once again, but here was irrefutable proof that he had failed. He could see Bristow’s face, set grimly but with a little smile at

the corners of his lips. He saw the gloomy face of Tanker Tring, his bowler hat well down over his ears. The odds seemed overwhelming, and the shock of the surprise itself was enough to unsteady the Baron.

The two policemen were out of range from the window before Mannering moved, and a moment later the noise of their knocking echoed through the house. Mannering began scooping the Didcotte jewels into his pockets. There was nothing on the premises to connect him with John Mannering, and although Bristow could suspect a lot, proof was all that mattered.

He heard the second rat-tat-tat as he started down the stairs, breathing very hard. Beneath the grease-paint he was pale, but there was nothing in the manner of the portly Mr. Mayle, who opened the door a moment later, to suggest he was John Mannering. The transformation was so complete that even Bristow, now face to face with his man, was momentarily afraid of another mistake.

Then he saw Mannering's hazel eyes.

He spoke heavily yet jubilantly. No man could hide or disguise his eyes, and Mannering had made a single mistake – he had left his thick-lensed glasses upstairs.

'Well, Mannering,' Bristow said. 'I've come for you at last.'

Shock tactics, thought Mannering, and he frowned.

'I beg your pardon?' The voice was high-pitched and unfamiliar.

'You needn't try to fool me this time,' Bristow said. 'You've managed it too often.'

'There seems,' said Mr. Mayle, in that high-pitched voice, 'to be some mistake. Who are you, sir?'

'My name is Bristow,' said Bristow more heavily. 'From Scotland Yard. I want to search the house.'

'Search the house? Whatever for?'

'You'll learn,' said Bristow.

'I have no doubt,' said Mr. Mayle, 'that there is some explanation of this absurd visit. You say you are a policeman. May I see your credentials?'

Bristow did the obvious thing, the thing he would have done when calling at the house of any man who was wanted for interrogation. He showed his card. Mannering peered at it, apparently short-sightedly.

'Ah, yes. Well—well, you have a warrant?'

'No, but . . .'

'My dear sir,' said Mr. Mayle testily, 'you may be a policeman, but these methods are deplorable – deplorable! You come here saying you wish to search the house. You give me no reason. You apparently labour under the delusion that I am someone else, and you have the impertinence to say you've no warrant. Supposing I refuse to allow you to enter?'

It was all skilfully done, and Bristow was on his guard now, prepared for a trick. The fact that two men were at the back of the house and one in the road outside gave him confidence.

'I shall send for one,' he replied stiffly. 'If you've nothing to hide you'll have nothing to worry about.'

Mannering glanced from one policeman to the other. He had given no hint that he was anything but what he looked, and had Bristow not been so sure he would have been worried. But the eyes did it, and the policeman's lips tightened.

'And . . .' he began, but Mannering cut him short.

'Well, I suppose if you've some good reason I'd better not stop you on a formality. What is it you want?'

'You know what I'm after, and . . .'

'For a senior police officer,' said the portly man, in a higher pitched tone than ever, 'your manners are deplorable. But if you must come in, you must.'

He stood aside. Bristow glanced behind him and saw the butterfly enthusiast standing in the drive gateway. He went past the portly man into the hall of The Grove.

Mannering peered at him again, and led the way along the passage.

There was a small room to the right, with no windows. He had had it in mind from the moment his mind had started working again, and now he saw Bristow falling into the trap. Of course there would be other men outside, but Bristow was the chief threat.

'Come into my study,' he said. 'Then perhaps you will have the goodness to explain more.'

Bristow grunted. Mannering opened the door and stood aside for the others to pass. Bristow went in, and Tring followed.

And then Bristow heard Mannering's deep voice, full of a mocking, ringing confidence.

'Goodbye, Bill!'

He slammed the door on the two policemen and turned the key in the lock almost before they realised what was happening. Bristow flung himself at the stout oak, but failed to make any impression on it, while Mannering darted towards the kitchen. The din that Bristow was creating was muffled, and there was no chance of it being heard outside.

Mannering reached the kitchen door and ran through the room towards the garden. He saw the heads of two men disappearing behind a hedge. Ignoring them, he hurried out and walked quickly towards the back gate of The Grove.

On either side of the gate the two plain-clothes men were waiting to pounce, without asking themselves what had happened to the Superintendent. They knew this man was suspected of being the Baron, and they were sweating for the chance of bringing him down. He came on, apparently unaware of their presence, and when he reached the gate he hesitated.

The two Yard men sprang at him.

They uttered no word, and neither did Mannering. He simply stepped back a pace in well-feigned alarm, and the Yard men collided. They were off their balance enough to put them at a disadvantage, and as one staggered his chin jutted out, close to Mannering.

Mannering put all the force at his control into a single blow, and he lifted

the man off his feet. The second detective saw what was happening and made a frantic effort to hit the Baron and draw his whistle at the same time. Mannering took a right swing on the side of the head, and planted a terrific straight left to the man's stomach.

He heard the gasp, and saw him doubling up. He had two or three minutes to spare, and did not propose to lose them. He hurried along the side of the house to the main road, as he reached it he saw the butterfly catcher.

Mannering stopped in his tracks.

The detective hesitated, undecided whether to use his whistle or run after his man. Mannering half turned and saw that the Yard men had plumped for pursuit. Mannering hid behind the hedge while the others rushed up, and pushed out his leg at the right moment. As the butterfly catcher fell forward, taken right off his feet. Mannering clipped him behind the ear with a jab that made the man's head reel.

'Try that on the butterflies,' murmured John Mannering.

Bristow and Tring were helpless inside, but the two men at the rear would be on their feet by now. Any moment he expected to hear the piercing alarm of a police whistle, but as the seconds passed it failed to come.

A taxi passed him, but he did not take it. Taxi-drivers were dubious helpers in broad daylight, and likely to pull up at the sound of a police whistle. A hundred yards along the road was a butcher's van, and Mannering ran towards it.

No one in the road had seen the fighting, but several people saw him running and wondered why. He reached the van as the butcher left the drive of the house he had been serving.

Mannering stopped and pivoted round.

'Sorry about this,' he said, and pushed the man back. As the butcher reeled away, his apron flying, Mannering slid into the driving seat of the van, and let in the clutch quickly.

By now the road was in an uproar. A dozen people had seen the attack on the butcher and guessed there was serious trouble, but Mannering pressed on the accelerator, sending the van hurtling along the road towards Putney. Shouts were ringing in his ears, but there was no other vehicle in sight. For a butcher's van the bus was travelling well, but a bend in the road hid the shouting, chasing crowd from the sight of the people ahead of the Baron, and the speeding brought no more than a dozen scowls.

Mannering took the van to the bottom of Putney Hill, pulled into the side and jumped out, leaving a pound note on the seat. A few people stared at him, but no one made a comment as he hurried across the road towards a Southern Region station, booked a ticket to Waterloo and ran down the stairs. Two minutes later a train came up, and Mannering dropped in the corner of a first-class carriage.

'It was Mannering all right,' said Bristow grimly. 'I'm sorry.'

‘Can’t be helped,’ said the bull-like Deputy Commander philosophically. ‘The luck of the devil, that man’s got. We’ve closed up a gate on him. I wonder if he’d bought that place?’

It was not long before he learned from a Putney estate agent that Mr. Mayle had bought the house. Moreover, he had paid cash for it.

‘If you hear a word from him, let us know at once,’ Lynch ordered.

The estate agent received a letter, signed by Mr. Mayle, two days later. He was to allow Mrs. Jenson to stay at The Grove as housekeeper until the place was let. Thereafter Mrs. Jenson should receive two pounds a week, and the surplus rental should be sent monthly to the Police Orphanage. The estate agent watched Superintendent Lynch’s face when he read the letter, and his opinion of the police force rose sharply. For Lynch laughed, so did Bristow, when he heard.

‘I like the beggar,’ Lynch admitted, ‘and I sometimes wonder whether we’ll get him.’

Chapter Sixteen

THE BARON GOES NORTH

The next week was a busy one for the Baron.

He visited Flick Leverson in his Mayle disguise, believing the police would not circulate its description, for they would take it for granted he would stop using it immediately. He was right. The old fence saw the Didcotte jewels and laughed.

'The last time you came you had a poor lot,' he said. 'You've certainly made up for it. May I congratulate you on the Surrey burglary?'

'Thanks,' smiled the Baron, 'but I'd rather have your congratulations on its value. What's it worth?'

Leverson took the stones one by one and flicked them away deliberately. Three of the larger pieces he set aside. The heap in the centre of the table he indicated with a wave of his hand.

'Twelve thousand for those. I shall have to take the others out of their settings before I can value them.'

'Let the balance stand to my credit,' said Mannering.

'Of course, of course.' The white-haired fence with the passion for collecting antiques stood up, and with his benevolent smile poured out a glass of dry sherry. Mannering drank it, commented on its flavour, chatted for five minutes and then left the Aldgate house. Leverson had paid two thousand pounds in cash, and promised to have the balance waiting by tomorrow.

Mannering changed at Aldgate tube station and left the last suit of Mr. Mayle's clothes there, never to be collected. Mr. Mayle was dead.

Half an hour later Mannering reached Bloom Street and saw Tanker Tring lounging outside his building. Tanker regarded him dismally.

'Busy?' inquired the Baron.

'Not so busy as I'm going to be,' said Tring forbiddingly. 'Mr. Bristow's waiting for you.'

'These pleasures will come all at once,' murmured Mannering. 'Tell me, Tanker, are you married?'

Tring moved one brown shoe over the other.

'Don't I look it?'

'Then take her home a bunch of flowers,' said Mannering, and he slipped a five-pound note, one of those collected from Leverson, into the policeman's hand. Tring was still gaping when Mannering reached his flat and found Bristow waiting at the door. It was evening, and Bristow was looking tired; but his buttonhole was fresh.

'Hallo, Bill,' smiled Mannering. 'Waiting for me?'

Bristow deigned no answer. Mannering chuckled, opened the door and waved the policeman in.

‘You go first this time,’ said Bristow.

‘This time?’ Not by word or deed would Mannering make an admission.

It was the fourth day after the Putney fiasco, and Bristow had not properly recovered from the reverse. The evidence of the hazel eyes would be useless in a court of law. There was no possible way of bringing Mannering to book through the Wimbledon incident, although Bristow was sure of the dual identity.

‘Well, Bill, what is it?’ Mannering asked.

‘I want to look round,’ said Bristow.

‘What – again? All right, help yourself.’

Bristow made another fruitless search of the flat. Even the Baron’s best Scotch failed to cheer him. Mannering guessed he had called to try to catch him off his guard, and he had found the Baron as alert as ever. Like Superintendent Lynch, Bristow was beginning to wonder whether they would ever catch the Baron.

The Baron was not letting the possibility worry him.

The Fauntley-Teevens affair seemed to have settled itself easily, and Didcotte could be put on his list of friends. Mannering felt that at last he could go north and see Lorna. She would have read of his exploits, and it would be good to talk to her about them.

He thought, perhaps more gloomily than usual, of the fact that marriage was impossible.

Her husband, Rennigan, was somewhere in the background. One day there would be a reckoning with Rennigan.

Mannering packed his clothes for a week north of the Tweed. Lorna and Lady Fauntley were staying near Glamis, and a week on the moors and the foothills would suit his mood. He chose to travel by night, booked a sleeper, sent his luggage on to the station and prepared for dinner at the Elan before starting the journey. He felt contented and resigned to a period of inaction. That old motive of cracksmanship for the sake of the gain, was gone.

‘Bill Bristow would love to hear that,’ Mannering told himself as he reached the Elan. ‘And I might tell him one day. I . . .’

‘Hallo, John,’ came a voice in his ear, and Mannering turned quickly. He found himself looking into the smiling eyes of Miss Philippa Grey.

Mannering continued to smile as he took her hand. She was looking delightful, and he said so, but seeing her made him realise that she knew he was the Baron.

So did Didcotte and Teevens.

Too many people knew the truth, and the sense of security into which he had lulled himself disappeared. He trusted Philippa Grey, but she would be no match for Bristow or Lynch should they ever learn the connection between them.

The war was on, whether the Baron was in action or not. He had to watch every action, every word; he dared not relax.

‘You’re looking thoughtful,’ said Philippa.

‘I was thinking of our last meeting,’ Mannering smiled. ‘I hope you’ve

forgotten it.'

'You'll have to hope on,' laughed the girl. 'But it's a close secret – don't worry. Alice Purnall tried for a week to make me talk, but even she's beginning to forget. She was very, very grateful.'

'I'm glad I could help. Are you alone?'

'No, I'm with my uncle. Jimmy Rombell!'

Her eyes were twinkling.

'We owe him a lot for that night,' said Mannering. 'If you want to hoodwink a country policeman mention the local peer of the realm.'

'Why don't you join us?' asked Philippa. 'Then you could thank him in person.'

'I might try,' chuckled the Baron, 'so I won't take the chance. I—*now* what's caught your eye?'

For Philippa Grey looked past him towards the door of the foyer, and he could see the laughter in her eyes.

'One of your victims, isn't it?'

Jonathan Didcotte entered the foyer with a plump little woman, Mary, his wife, and his son. Guy's eyes lit up, and he crossed to Mannering immediately. Mannering could imagine what Philippa Grey was thinking, for she knew only what the papers had told of the affair at The Towers.

Mannering introduced Philippa and Guy, and reflected that they made a nice-looking pair. Jonathan Didcotte came towards them.

'Hallo, Mannering. Would you care to join us?'

'He's just refused to join me,' Philippa said, 'so I don't see how he dare.'

'You can help to make a party,' suggested Guy, and his expression told of an admiration for Philippa Grey. Guy Didcotte had a straightforward simplicity.

Lord Rombell, stout, middle-aged and possessed of a passion for sherry and cricket, bustled up. There were introductions all round, and they chatted while Henri arranged a table.

Mannering left the party at ten o'clock, telling himself that it had only needed Fauntley and Teevens to complete the party.

He had seen Guy and Philippa dance cheek to cheek, with Philippa now dreamy, now vivacious. He did not notice the lantern-jawed little man who was waiting outside the hotel and who, after Mannering had directed his cabby to St. Pancras, gave the same order to a second man.

The two cabs threaded their way across London. Mannering was feeling more content now, although he was keenly aware of the need for caution. At Glamis, however, there would be no need to worry. He had hardly realised how much he wanted a rest.

The lantern-jawed man saw him talking to a porter ten minutes before the Scottish express left. He hurried to a telephone booth and was soon talking to Augustus Teevens.

'Morley here,' he said. 'He's going to Scotland.'

'Follow him,' ordered Teevens. 'Watch him all the time, Morley – *all* the time, understand?'

‘I’ll do all that all right, sir.’

‘Mind you do,’ said Teevens. ‘I’m going to ruin that man one day.’

Mannering always preferred to leave the train at Perth and complete the journey by road. He had wired Lorna to expect him, but he was not surprised to find her waiting at Perth station at half-past nine on the following morning.

He had slept well on the train, a trick he had developed after many night journeys, and was looking what Lorna called his best.

She hurried towards him, eagerly. She was dressed in brown tweeds, and her eyes were glowing, her dark hair clustered beneath a wide-brimmed hat set a little aslant. There were people who said that she was not beautiful; Mannering knew they were wrong. There were times when she seemed sullen, moody and mutinous; those were the times when she thought of Rennigan, and brooded. Only Mannering knew why. He knew also that her eyes were the loveliest in the world whenever she forgot the past. In real repose the chiselled squareness of her chin, her straight nose and perfect lips, and her brows, unplucked and a little heavy, made rare beauty.

Yet he rarely spoke of it; there was a gift of understanding between them, and words weren’t needed.

‘Good journey, darling?’ she asked.

‘Not bad at all. What time did you get here?’

‘Five minutes ago – but I thought you’d never come. You’ve been busy?’

‘So you read the papers?’

‘I’m almost afraid to,’ she admitted.

They were past the station barrier now, and Lorna’s car, a 1½ litre Jaguar, was standing outside. Porters trundled the luggage to the rear, and they were soon off on the cross-country run.

He knew she told the truth when she claimed to be almost afraid to look at the papers. She dreaded the possibility of opening the pages one morning and finding his name splashed in the headlines as the Baron. When she was in London, and with him much of the time, it was not so harassing. She knew what he was doing, and often she could help. But nearly five hundred miles had separated them, and three times the headlines of the national Press had carried stories of the Baron’s exploits.

‘There’s an inside story, of course,’ he said.

‘Concerning Augustus Teevens?’

‘Yes.’

‘I know Teevens. I wouldn’t trust him anywhere, and Daddy seemed to rely on him too much. I knew you weren’t looking for trouble’—she smiled at him as she sat at the wheel—’and I’d heard rumours of Alice Purnall’s necklace. So I put one and a half and two and a bit together. Have you finished with Teevens?’

‘I think so.’

‘Don’t be too sure,’ Lorna said.

‘Am I ever?’ Mannering asked lightly. ‘Now let’s talk about you, and we’ll

get the worst over first. Have you heard from Rennigan?'

'Only the usual monthly demand,' Lorna said, and her expression almost defied Mannering's understanding. They went along in silence for twenty minutes, with the Jaguar devouring the miles, and the hills and moor spreading out in front of them and on all sides.

They stopped at the crest of a hill, for a grey-blue mist was spreading over a vale below, and above it the tops of the trees seemed like spires touching the blue of the skies. To the east the sun was spreading its aura of yellow and gold, but the heat was tempered by a soft wind. Mannering revelled in the scene. Lorna glanced behind her and saw a car some hundred yards away. Twenty minutes later they passed it pulled into the side of the road.

'A Perth station cab,' Lorna said thoughtfully, 'They don't often come out as far as this.'

They were in Coupar Angus when they next saw the cab, and this time Mannering took notice of the lantern-jawed passenger. He had taken the wheel, and he was beginning to wonder whether Lantern-Jaw was the casual traveller he seemed to be.

He had seen the man at Perth and thought nothing of it, but to have two people on their tail was strange, to say the least. It was stranger still when the cab passed the drive of Fauntley's Forfarshire house, a moment after the Jaguar had turned in.

'He's following you,' Lorna said.

'We'll keep a look out for the gentleman,' Mannering said. 'One thing's certain; he won't get anything up here.'

'You're going to be so good!'

'I'm going to be lazy,' said Mannering, and he was longing to get into the house, to greet Lady Fauntley and then to take Lorna in his arms.

Meanwhile Lantern-Jaw was enquiring for a room at an expensive hotel in Glamis. As Teevens was paying the bill it might as well be a big one.

In the course of the week things amused Mannering and worried Lorna. Lantern-Jaw was often near them. Occasionally they walked across the moors without him, but more often than not he was close at hand. A slim, youthful-looking man from Scotland Yard, named Ward, had reached Glamis on the train after Mannering's, but Mannering had expected someone from the Yard. Ward represented little or no menace, but Lantern-Jaw was an unknown quantity.

The headlines that had followed The Towers burglary had died away. For four days there had not been a paragraph concerning the latest statement of the police that an arrest was pending, but on the fifth day the *Scots Echo,* looking for a synthetic sensation, ran a special article on the Baron.

The Baron was popular even up here.

The public read of his exploits, knew that no one suffered who could not comfortably afford to and watched the career of the Baron with an increasing interest. He was a lone man pitting himself against the police and society. His daring had rarely been equalled. And the feature writer in the

Echo developed the glamour of the Baron.

> And [went on the article] I learned that a house in Wimbledon recently used by the cracksman was found by the police. It was let later on his written instructions, and the proceeds of the letting were given to the Police Orphanage. What can one make of a man who lives a life of crime, and yet has time for sudden flashes of humour and human generosity.

In a dozen ways the Police Orphanage story, given to the Press by the estate agent who had overheard Lynch mention the Baron, was written up for the public. Gossip helped to strengthen the legend. Two country house burglaries in Sussex were attributed to the Baron, and a fresh wave of publicity started. In it all the Baron saw what others had seen before.

He was a legendary figure now, and he had as many admirers as he had enemies. His partisans were legion, north and south of the Tweed. Even Lady Fauntley, a cheerful little woman who remembered the days when her Hugo had been a simple bookmaker's clerk, commented on him favourably.

'You can't approve of barefaced robbery,' Mannering said easily.

'Well—well, certainly *not,"* said Lucy Fauntley. 'He deserves to be caught. But I hope they don't get him, John; I do hope they don't.'

'Then you're as big a criminal as he is,' Lorna said. 'Stuff and nonsense, my dear! I've seen *you* reading the stories about him with a lot more interest than you should.' Her eyes twinkled at Mannering, whose heart jumped suddenly. Could she have guessed? 'You shouldn't leave her alone so long, John. And, by the way, did Hugo say whether he was coming? I really forget. I expect he will, because there's a big party at The Lodge – Colonel Moore's place, you know – and Hugo nearly always comes up for it.'

'What kind of party?' asked Mannering.

'Oh jewels, John. You really should see the Colonel's collection. I simply *hate* the man, and so does Hugo, but I have to admit his collection is every bit as good as ours. Hugo doesn't, but, of course, he's jealous. And so is Moore. You should have heard him when he learned that Hugo had managed to get that pigeon's-egg ruby from the Museum. He simply frothed at the mouth.'

'Not here?' Mannering said, his brows raised.

'Yes, *here!* The man's a pig. He wouldn't have done it if Hugo had been about, but he came and was most rude. I had to try very hard not to be rude back. You must meet the Colonel, John; he's like you in many ways, the beast. He—oh! Lorna, why didn't you warn me?—I didn't mean it like that at all. Only to look at, John. He's coming to see me this afternoon. He's heard you're a collector, and he'll boast, I expect. *What* did you say, Lorna?'

Lorna stopped laughing, and kissed Lucy Fauntley's greying hair.

'I said you were priceless, darling. So Colonel Moore is coming this afternoon. John, didn't you say you had to be at Edinburgh?'

'You can't leave me alone!' protested Lucy Fauntley, aghast at the

suggestion. ‘I told him particularly to come and meet John.’

She looked imploringly at John Mannering.

‘I wouldn’t dream of leaving you alone with such a monster,’ Mannering said.

Colonel Moore was wealthy and arrogant, with a streak of meanness and a streak of greed. His collection was closely guarded, and he boasted frequently that no thief would ever break in. His strong-room was impregnable, absolutely impregnable.

‘Even to the Baron,’ declared Colonel Moore; a large, rather flabby man, with dark hair and pale brown eyes.

‘Absolutely impregnable, my little place. Why don’t you come and see it? I’ll have all the stones out on display the night before the party.’

Lorna, sitting in an easy chair, gripped the arms tightly, for she could sense a challenge Mannering would not be able to resist. Lady Fauntley said under her breath that the Colonel had never asked Hugo to see the collection before the show – she said ‘show’ aloud and disparagingly. Mannering smiled.

‘I’d like to,’ he said. Lorna was suddenly afraid.

Chapter Seventeen

BURGLARY AT THE LODGE

'I suppose it's useless to ask you not to go?' Lorna said.

She spoke as Mannering was sitting opposite her in the drawing-room of the Glamis house.

'Do you want me to stay away?'

'There's the policeman, and the other man, both watching you. It's different here from the south. You don't know the country well, and it would be easy to fall foul of the Scottish police.'

'Probably,' agreed Mannering.

'All of which makes you want to try,' Lorna said, with a laugh. 'Well, I'm not going to start telling you what to do, but darling, be careful.'

'I'll warn you if I feel like getting to work,' Mannering assured her. In fact he was wondering whether it would be wise to tackle Colonel Moore's place. He disliked Moore, who was the worst type of ex-officer, and incredibly arrogant. It would be almost worthwhile to raid The Lodge, which was two miles from Fauntley's house, because of that alone.

Mannering decided to visit the Colonel socially, for a start. He reached the decision on the morning of the day then he was due to go to The Lodge. Lorna and Lady Lucy had gone into Perth for shopping, and the Baron spent the morning alone, walking the moors and telling himself that Scotland could hardly be beaten for ruggedness and space. He timed his return to the house for lunch, when Lorna was due. He was late, reaching home at a quarter-past one, and the first voice he heard as he reached the morning-room door was Lorna's.

'*Now* will you get out?'

The Baron stiffened. There was a hard note in Lorna's voice, a tenseness he had rarely heard. He waited, seeing that the door was ajar, thus accounting for the clearness with which he heard the outburst.

Colonel Moore's gruff tones followed, and the Colonel was not in a good temper.

'You're a little spitfire, are you? Spitfires have been tamed, my dear.'

His voice grew louder towards the end, and Mannering stood a couple of yards back as the door opened and Moore, his face a turkey red, stamped into the passage.

Mannering saw Lorna, standing by the table and very pale. Moore pulled up, taken by surprise, and Mannering kept a tight hold on himself. He would certainly not have gone to The Lodge that night but for Lucy Fauntley, who hurried from the drawing-room suddenly and blundered short-sightedly towards Mannering.

'Oh, there you are, John, we kept lunch for you. I—er—oh, I didn't expect *you* to be here still, Colonel. Will you stay to lunch?'

‘Er—no, thanks, no,’ grunted Moore. Probably he had seen the warning light in Mannering’s eyes. He nodded to Lady Lucy, murmured ‘See you tonight’ to Mannering.

Lorna was more relaxed when Mannering came back. They had no time for talking until after lunch, when Mannering asked: ‘What happened?’

Lorna’s eyes were twinkling.

‘Jealous, darling? Moore’s an old fool. Don’t take any notice of him.’

‘Was it the first time he’d tried to discover you were a spitfire?’ Mannering asked lightly.

‘Oh, he’s quite harmless . . .’

‘Tell me a charity you would like Moore to contribute a few thousands to, darling, and it’s as good as done. And if any other lecherous old reprobate tries tricks, don’t hold out on me for so long.’

‘Do you really think you can manage him?’

‘Or that impregnable safe of his?’

‘One and the same, aren’t they?’

‘More or less,’ chuckled Mannering. ‘We’ll use strategy instead of brute force, sweetheart.’

Colonel Arnold Moore held his house-party once a year, and always celebrated the first day of it by showing his collection of precious stones. It was a large collection, and Mannering agreed, when he visited The Lodge that evening that it rivalled Fauntley’s. He found Moore affable enough now. He was probably wondering whether the argument in the morning-room had been overheard. Lorna and Lady Fauntley had decided to stay at home. Mannering admired the stones and passed remarks enough to convince Moore that he was an expert judge. Under the influence of a succession of double whiskies, Moore waxed eloquent.

‘It’s a wonderful collection, Mannering, although I say it myself. Not ashamed of a single jewel in it. And in a wonderful place. That strong-room’s absolutely impregnable.’

‘Of course, you use a watchman as well?’

‘Oh, yes, old Menzies. But there’s no need. It’s electrically operated. That’s the secret. Don’t tell it to everyone, of course, but that’s it. Doors so thick it would hardly be possible to cut through with a burner. Possible, of course, but a long job. Specially reinforced with asbestos wire to resist oxy-acetylene flames. Absolutely impossible for anyone to get inside that strong-room.’

‘It’s a remarkable place,’ conceded Mannering.

The strong-room at The Lodge was on the ground floor, and, as at The Towers, it was surrounded by blank walls. While the keep had been built inside the castle, the strong-room had once been an ordinary room, but Moore had had two windows bricked up. There was no means of access except through the library.

The door of the room was eighteen inches thick, and Mannering was prepared to believe that it would resist a burner unless the flame was in use for several hours. To obviate the possibility of that, Moore explained, his

one guard – actually a ghillie who had a great deal of spare time – walked through the library once every hour through the night.

'And he's armed, of course,' Mannering said, showing an intelligent interest.

'Yes, of course, and he's a good shot. Oldish, but good. Not that there's anything to worry about, Mannering.'

'But confound it,' exclaimed Mannering, 'you don't leave a quarter of a million pounds' worth of stuff in that strong-room with only one old man to guard it. Particularly when it's on display, as it is now?'

Moore blinked round the room, which was practically square, some twelve feet by twelve. The walls were lined with small safes, each in turn operated on the same electrical principle with current supplied by a powerful generating plant in the gardens of The Lodge.

'Between ourselves, Mannering, there will be one or two others tonight. Don't want it generally known. Experts, as a matter of fact, from London.'

'Yard men?' Mannering flashed, and filled Moore's glass.

'Yard men – *poof!* Certainly not. Good agency men are better any day. A policeman gets paid whether he does his job or not, but a private agent's paid only by results. Consequently does a much, much better job. Haw! Mannering, I'm tired! Quite worn out.'

'I'll be getting back,' said Mannering, taking the hint. Yawning most of the time, Moore tried to press him to a final night-cap and saw him to the door.

Outside Mannering was very thoughtful.

The strong-room was as nearly impregnable as anything could be. The men from London added the final touch. It was lucky Moore had been drunk enough to tell him about that. A queer fellow, Moore, secretive in many ways, and but for Mannering's direct questions the news of the special agents would have been kept back. The biggest hazard was the element of uncertainty. Four men could be easily handled if he had foreknowledge of them, but to come expecting one and to find three or four, lengthened the odds.

But there was a weak link at The Lodge. With a little luck it would prove possible, but, before he started there was the problem of the lantern-jawed man and Ward, from Scotland Yard.

As it happened, Gus Teevens's man made a mistake, after seeing Mannering leave The Lodge and reach Fauntley's house. He took it for granted that nothing would happen that night. He had orders only to watch Mannering and report, and had no idea that Mannering was the Baron, or he might have spent less time in bed during the night and more during the day. He saw Mannering enter the smaller house, but did not know that Mannering followed him half the way back to Glamis to make sure he was settled for the night.

Ward, the Yard man, was a different proposition. For the most part he was on duty by night. Moreover, there was just the possibility that he was co-operating with the Scottish police.

It was midnight when Mannering reached Fauntley's house after his visit to The Lodge.

Lady Fauntley had gone to bed; Lorna was dozing in an easy chair. She looked up with a tired smile as he opened the door.

'Have you finished?'

'I'm just going to start, sweetheart. Why aren't you in bed?'

'I'm not going to bed,' said Lorna. 'John isn't this a time when two are better than one?'

'Which two?' Mannering took her wrists, pulled her out of the chair, and kissed her. He picked her up, carrying her without an effort, and deposited her two minutes later by the side of her bed. She was laughing a little, and in the dim light of the lamp from the hall she could see his gay smile that was always there when he was starting 'work'.

'One of us behind bars will be more than enough, thank you, and remember your morals. I'll come up when I'm back.'

Ward, that young and hopeful policeman, was hiding in the grounds of the Fauntley house. Mannering had seen him when he had entered, but he could not see him from the windows. Nonetheless, he believed he could outwit his man. Ward was waiting near the front gate; there was a back one, and no one could be in two places at once.

Mannering had brought his tools with him, and wrapped them about his waist in the same way as usual. Now he was only wearing the blue handkerchief for disguise.

Mannering, with a dark coat turned up to hide his shirt-front, a trilby hat pulled well down in the front and blue fabric gloves with rubber fingertips pulled over his hands, felt reasonably safe from discovery. He merged with the darkness as he left the house by a side entrance, walking towards the front drive gates on the outside of the hedge surrounding the house grounds.

Just inside, and behind a row of laurels, Ward was waiting. There was still a light in Mannering's room. Mannering had left it there purposely, guessing Ward's attention would be on it. He was right. Ward was staring towards the lighted window, and did not hear the Baron's approach.

The window shed a dim glow about the ground, and Mannering could just make out Ward's head and shoulders. He crept nearer, prepared for sudden discovery, but Ward was cramped and a little tired.

Mannering was less than a yard away at last, and he stretched out his hand.

Ward felt something brush against his shoulder, swung round in alarm, and then felt a hand over his mouth, preventing him from crying out. More than a hand: something sticky, something that he could not move. All the time his right wrist was gripped in a hand that had the strength of a vice.

Mannering withdrew his right hand at last, and Ward tried in vain to free his lips from a broad piece of adhesive plaster. He struggled, but he was smaller than Mannering and in nothing like such good trim. Mannering made no sound, and only the thudding of their feet on the ground disturbed the silence.

Mannering had been prepared for trouble, and he used the same method when he could. Ward, still struggling, felt his wrists pressed together, and then a pair of police handcuffs snapped. Mannering swept him off his feet, prevented him from hitting the ground too hard, and bound cord about his ankles.

In less than five minutes the man from the Yard was lying in the laurel bushes, helpless and unable to move. Mannering was so preoccupied that he forgot the ditch outside the drive gates, stumbled, and just managed to save himself from a ducking. The ditch was narrow but deep, and the water flowed along it swiftly. Half a mile away it ran into a small loch, and then flowed into the river.

'My luck's still in,' Mannering said aloud. 'Now for The Lodge and Colonel Moore.'

He had decided to walk, for a car on those lonely moors would not be a great deal of help. Half an hour's steady walking brought him to The Lodge gates. He opened them and walked through, leaving them open in case of need for a sudden get-away.

Old Menzies, who had sounded anything but dangerous, and the two agency men had to be coped with now.

The agency men puzzled Mannering.

He hardly knew why, but he had not believed Moore when the man said he had brought them specially from London because of the show. On the other hand, the explanation was reasonable enough. But there was something shifty about Colonel Moore, and Mannering was beginning to wonder whether the affair was going to be as easy as he had thought.

Was it possible that Moore had his suspicions, that the affability had been false, that a trap was set?

The Baron was feeling fidgety now, as he always did before a job. The silence seemed more remote here, the loneliness of The Lodge seemed accentuated; and now a light wind was springing up, whining through the trees, hissing through the long grass and the heather.

Ahead of him The Lodge loomed dark against the starlit sky. A tall tree was waving gently, topping the house by a few feet and moving there like a watchful sentinel. Imagination, Mannering knew, but he was on edge, ready for trouble at any moment, suspicious even of the silence. Moore was of the type who could hardly tell the truth if he wanted to.

As he drew nearer the house the Baron walked on the grass verge. He was less than twenty yards away when he heard the first rustle of sound. A man was walking towards him along the drive, going carefully so as not to make much noise on the gravel.

Mannering hugged the shadows of some trees and waited. The approaching man would have to pass within six feet of him. If he decided to get on the verge he would pass within a few inches of the Baron.

Mannering waited breathlessly. The footsteps, breaking clearly through the silence, came nearer. It was not pitch-dark, and Mannering could just make out the white oval of the man's face.

The Baron's body went suddenly rigid.

Detective-Superintendent Bristow was walking along the drive!

So Bristow was here, in Forfarshire.

The 'agency men' came from Scotland Yard; it was not too risky to jump to that conclusion. Either Moore had lied by habit, or he suspected Mannering. Bristow might even have asked for his co-operation. The sounds of Bristow's footfalls dropped away, although the vague shape of the detective was clear enough against the background of stars and sky.

Mannering told himself he was a fool, a hundred times a fool, not to give up the attempt. But the Baron had never started a raid without trying to finish it. Bristow or no Bristow, he would not back out now. He found a window next to the porch, a large window close to the ground and apparently easy to open. It was easy; but on the other side the burglary alarm would be prepared, ready to waken the household with its clamour once the thief was through.

Mannering turned away quickly. The window would be all right for the entry later on. The weak spot in Moore's impregnable strong-room was the next thing to worry about.

There was enough light from the stars, and he did not need his torch. Keeping to the grass, he reached the rear of The Lodge and saw the big shed where the generating plant was housed. He could make out the door, the shape of the roof and the light inside.

If there was a light there would be someone using it!

Mannering went on tiptoe now, hardly daring to breathe. He expected to meet Menzies; he was half afraid of meeting dogs. But he met neither, although he had another shock. He should have expected it, but for some reason the likelihood of it hadn't occurred to him.

A low-powered light was burning in the dull yellow inside the shed, and on a stiff-backed chair a man was sitting with a gun in his hand, staring towards the door.

Mannering stopped dead still by the door, peering round it, yet making sure the man could not see him.

It was Detective Sergeant Tanker Tring, and he looked like business!

The weak spot was known by the police all right, and Mannering's heart was racing!

The strong-room doors were controlled by electricity. Without electricity they would be useless, and although the wires and cables might lead underground, the supply was here. Put the plant out of action, and he could do what he liked inside the strong-room.

But Moore, Bristow and Tring knew that, so Tring was sitting here, a Tring who would shoot at the sight of a masked stranger.

Mannering stooped down and picked up a pebble. He could just see Tring, and he knew enough of the policeman's habits to guess what would happen next. He tossed the pebble through the open door, and heard it hit against the wall behind the sergeant. It had the desired effect. Tring jumped out of

his chair and swung towards the wall from where the sound had come. As he turned the Baron leaped through the open door, his gas-pistol ready. Tring heard him and swung round, but he had no time even to touch the trigger of his gun, for he met a charge of ether-gas which sent him swaying backward, coughing as he went.

The Baron grabbed the other's gun to stop it clattering, and then lowered Tring gently to the ground. The man was right out, and for some time yet he would be useless, while the Baron could do what he liked with the generating plant.

It took him three minutes to find the control switch and disconnect it. The yellow light in the shed went out immediately, and there was no power at all in the house – the strong-room was far from impregnable.

But if Bristow and Tring were in the grounds there was no knowing what other guards would be inside.

Chapter Eighteen

SENSATION!

Mannering's awareness of danger was stronger than he had ever experienced before, and he was strongly tempted not to go on.

But he would not turn back now.

Why had Bristow been going out of the grounds?

'Forget it!' Mannering muttered. He hurried to the front of the house again. The window he had selected was easy to force. A small screwdriver set back the catch, and he was able to open it without trouble. He groped down the sides in the darkness for the alarm wires and found them.

As the window had moved upward the wires had been pulled, and if the current had been running the alarm would have awakened the household. Everything was working out as Mannering had expected. He moved across to the door quickly, walked through the wide hall to the library, his footsteps deadened by thick carpet. The place was in total darkness; even if there had been a light burning by the strong-room door it had been cut off now.

Mannering stood in the threshold and held his breath. He heard nothing. He went forward slowly, hand outstretched, and touched the strong-room door.

There was a supplementary lock, but it was of a conventional type, and a pick-lock soon forced it back. Mannering pulled at the door of the strong-room, and it opened without a protesting squeak. He was in!

He used his flat torch, shining it over the scintillating beauties on the tables. The collection, ready for the show on the following day, the unpleasant Colonel's pride. Mannering was breathing hard through his nose. He wanted to take the smaller, more easily disposed of gems; it would be madness to try and take them all. The small ones were his, and he collected them quickly, hardly noticing whether they were diamonds or pearls, rubies or emeralds.

He filled his pockets quickly. The sharp facets of the stones pressed against the rubber fingertips as he hurried. Yet with all the success that feeling of panic, close to him all the time, was stronger than ever. This could not last; it *had* been too easy.

He turned round, his sense of direction as sure as ever, and found himself in the hall, then the room through which he had entered. The window was still up, and no sound came from inside or outside.

Mannering stepped through cautiously, carrying his gas-pistol in his right hand; his left was clenched. The only sound was of the increasing force of the wind. He reached the grass verge of the drive and hurried, more careless than he should have been, and reached the gates. There was no sign of the guard, nor of Bristow. It had all the appearances of a trap, and he was still

on edge.

The walk across the moors in the whining darkness did nothing to allay his fears. He was well away from The Lodge, he had roused no one but the hapless Tanker Tring – and yet he was not happy.

He was frowning as he reached Fauntley's house. The obvious thing to do was to go in the back way, as he had come. He hardly knew what prompted him, but he decided to look round before he did so; and when he came to the drive gates he recognised Bristow's black Austin car a few yards away.

The front rooms of the house were lighted, although the blinds were drawn!

The premonition had been justified right enough. Bristow was waiting for the Baron to return with the proceeds. A dozen thoughts flashed through the Baron's mind, and the first was Bristow's apparent carelessness. Only Tring had come with him from London, and Ward had come on ahead. But why would Bristow think three were enough? He had used five men at Putney.

Mannering walked softly, keeping twenty yards from the fence surrounding the house. He went more slowly towards the car. As he moved he caught a glimpse of a man's head and shoulders, not thirty yards away.

He stopped dead still, his heart thumping. He stared right and left, thankful for the dim light of the stars. Now a second figure materialised. A third . . .

Bristow had brought a strong force, determined Mannering should not get away once he was at the house. The Lodge *had* been a trap. And now, although the fence and hedges were peopled, the car itself was empty and unattended. Had Mannering not seen Bristow and recognised Tring he would not have had the slightest suspicion.

He could not even be sure that he had not been seen. The men would be waiting for him to walk into the trap.

The stones in his pockets were like hot coals. He ground his heel into the turf with a futile, furious rage against himself. If he turned and tried a getaway the risk was great. If he went on . . .

He took a false step, felt the ground giving way and pulled himself back abruptly. The damp turf gave no sound, but the sudden drop gave Mannering an idea. There was the ditch along the side of the road, with water over a foot deep and running fast.

And nearby was a manhole with a grille top!

His eyes were bright as he unloosened the kit from about his waist and placed it gently on the ground. The manhole cover was easy to lift, and he dropped the kit into the hole. There was hardly a sound. One at a time, he dropped the gems in. The moss-covered bricks at the side of the hole deadened the noise of their fall, there was not even a splash as they went in.

Mannering was telling himself now that there *was* a chance of escape. Even if the jewels were found there by the police, they would not be able to prove who put them there.

He screwed the blue silk scarf, mark of the Baron, into a tiny ball about

two of the gems and let that follow the others. Then he straightened up and began to walk away from the house. Twice he glanced behind him, each time seeing one of the watchers. He bent down, and lit a match. As it flared, Mannering jerked an exclamation and muttered, 'Got it!'

He straightened up to find himself looking into the eyes of a plain-clothes man whose voice was very hard.

'What have you found, sir?'

Mannering literally jumped.

'You startled me!'

'Sorry, sir.' The man, taken aback by Mannering's obvious surprise, had no idea how Mannering's heart was thumping. 'What were you saying?'

'I'd dropped my fountain pen, and I've found it.' He showed the pen, and looked into the man's eyes. 'But who the devil are you?'

'The police, sir. Are you Mr. Mannering?'

'The police?' Mannering frowned, but the following laugh was louder and more genuine. 'Don't tell me *Bristow* is in this part of the world?'

'The Superintendent is waiting to interview you, sir.'

'Well, well, well,' said Mannering.

He was smiling widely when he reached the front door of the house. It was opened by a manservant. The library door was open, and Lorna was standing near. She looked tensely at Mannering, and his expression gave her courage.

'Hallo, darling, back already?'

'Yes.' Mannering entered the room with his arm round her waist.

'Hallo, Bill,' he said. 'What's brought you north?'

According to his lights, Bristow was a fair man, and Lady Fauntley, in a heavy quilted dressing-gown, was sitting in an easy chair. As Mannering entered she jumped up.

'John, the Superintendent says you might help him – he's got such a lot of questions to ask. I told him you often went out for a walk at night, but he decided to wait. I do hope you'll be able to do something. Apparently there's a thief about. I . . .'

'I'll certainly try,' said Mannering, as Lady Fauntley paused for breath. 'But aren't you cold?'

'Well, yes, but it doesn't matter, and I . . .'

'You go to bed,' said Mannering cheerfully. 'That is, unless the Superintendent thinks you can help?'

'There's no need for Lady Fauntley to wait,' said Bristow stiffly. He was in pale grey, his eyes were tired, but his moustache was newly clipped and his gardenia was fresh.

Lady Fauntley's bright eyes searched Bristow's face and then Mannering's.

'All right, all right, John. Lorna, you'll come up?'

'Shall I be in the way?' Lorna asked, and Mannering said 'No' quickly. They watched Lady Fauntley leave the room, Mannering wondering whether she knew more about him than she professed.

But the door closed, and Bristow was looking bleak.

Mannering got in first. ‘Thanks, Bill.’

‘Where have you been?’ Bristow demanded.

‘For a walk.’

‘Do you always go out at one o’clock?’

‘I went out at twelve. Didn’t Lady Fauntley say so?’

‘You’ve been to The Lodge, you mean, and—ah!’

The telephone in the room burred out. Bristow stepped towards it quickly and picked up the receiver. Mannering and Lorna drew close. Mannering dared not say much, but he managed to whisper, ‘Down the manhole outside.’

She nodded, her eyes suddenly bright. Bristow was eyeing them suspiciously, but he was smiling now. He grunted once or twice into the telephone and then banged it down.

‘I’ve got you,’ he said quietly. ‘That was Colonel Moore. The Lodge has been burgled, and the Baron’s gas-pistol was used on Tring. I knew you would use that thing once too often!’

Mannering smiled. He was playing hard now, with the only weapon he had left – bluff.

‘You’re mixing me up again.’

‘Oh, am I,’ growled Bristow. ‘We’ll see. How about turning out your pockets.’

Mannering’s expression hardened. He managed to suggest alarm enough to make Bristow smile.

‘I certainly will not.’

‘If you won’t, you’ll be forcibly searched.’

‘Where’s your warrant?’ Mannering demanded coldly.

‘I don’t need one in order to arrest you on suspicion.’

‘Of what?’

‘Breaking and entering The Lodge, and stealing precious stones,’ said Bristow. ‘There’s no way out.’

Mannering shrugged his shoulders and grudgingly took his coat off. Bristow snatched it and ran through the pockets and the seams. The policeman’s expression darkened; he glowered at Mannering and then glanced at Lorna.

‘Will you go out for a moment, please?’

‘I’ll turn my back,’ smiled Lorna.

She turned again, three minutes later, to see Mannering smiling and Bristow red in the face. Mannering’s voice was very gentle.

‘Now I wonder why you thought I’d been to The Lodge, Superintendent. You should be more careful, even if you are a Yard man.’

‘Did you see him as he approached the house?’ Bristow asked the man who had brought Mannering in.

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Anything unusual?’

‘He said he had lost his fountain pen.’

‘And stooped down to look for it, eh? Well, we can’t do much tonight, but

we'll search outside in the morning. Mannering, don't think you've escaped. You were at The Lodge, and you brought those stones back. When I've found them . . .'

'Yes, Bill?'

'You'll be in the dock at last.'

John Mannering took a cigarette case from his pocket and proffered it.

'You're not so well tonight,' Mannering said. 'If Bill Sikes went to The Lodge and afterwards buried those stones in the front garden here, I can't help it. You've got to find Bill Sikes.'

'I've found the Baron,' said Bristow, hardly knowing why he took a cigarette.

'A matter of opinion,' said Mannering. 'I take it I'm no longer under arrest. Don't try me too far, Bill.'

'If I were you I wouldn't try to leave this house until I've seen you again,' said Bristow.

Mannering shrugged. Bristow did the only thing he could; he went out, but left a cordon of men round the house. Mannering watched him disappear down the drive, then turned to Lorna. He was smiling, but there was tension in his eyes.

'So far, so good. But in the morning they may find the stones.'

Lorna was holding him very tight.

'It's all right, darling. That ditch runs fast, and the water from the manhole drains into a tank at the back of the house. The stones will be there now!'

The tank was close to the outside wall of the kitchen, a comparatively small thing which stored water for the rough work of the house. It was always full, for the stream drained into it through a grating at the side of the manhole to keep out rubble. There was an escape hole at the top of the tank which drained the water into the continuation of the ditch on the far side of the house.

There was a second tap for emptying and cleaning the tank, which was done twice a week, for some mud and small stones flowed in with the water. In the darkness, well out of sight of the cordon of police, Mannering and Lorna emptied the tank and searched the bottom with the help of an electric torch.

They found the Moore jewels, most of them coated with mud. The tool-kit was half-way through the connecting pipe with Mannering's blue mask. The tools – innocent enough in a garage – were easily distributed, the waistband was burned with the blue handkerchief; the evidence that the Baron had been near was gone.

'And these trifles?' Mannering pointed to the heap of priceless stones on the floor.

'Why don't we put them in a sack of potatoes,' Lorna suggested. She broke into subdued laughter from time to time.

'My dear, when Bristow learns the ditch drains here, he'll search every

nook and cranny in the house and the grounds.'

'In Lord Fauntley's house? I don't think so, darling. He would have to get a warrant, and I doubt whether he could up here. It would take days, anyhow, and we'll get them away before then. Do you remember when they called you Lucky John Mannering?'

'And I'll believe them if we get rid of these things?'

'We'll get rid of them all right.' Lorna's eyes shone. 'All we have to do is get a sack of potatoes off the premises.'

At nine o'clock next morning Mannering reached the breakfast-room. The problem had seemed easy the night before, but it was really loaded with danger, for Lorna as well as for him.

Lady Fauntley was not down, but Lorna was reading a morning paper with such intentness that Mannering guessed there was a report of the burglary. She looked up quickly, and Mannering could see a tension which seemed a douche of cold water. What is it?' His voice was harsh.

'It—it doesn't seem possible. Yesterday the papers were with you. Today – well, look.'

Mannering looked at the headlines, his eyes narrowing. The thing came as a shock, so big that at first he hardly realised just what it meant.

Famous Irawa Ruby Stolen
Nationwide Search for The Baron

> The famous pigeon's blood ruby presented to the nation by the Rajah of Irawa was stolen last night from The Lodge, near Glamis, home of the famous jewel collector, Colonel Arnold Moore. The theft, cleverly planned . . .

The Baron read on, until he saw what Lorna meant. For the friendliness of the *Scots Echo* a few days before had changed. The last words ran:

> . . . the property of the nation must be restored. This notorious jewel thief has preyed on society too long, and the police must leave no stone unturned to arrest him and obtain the return of the ruby.

The Baron's eyes were very hard.

'Moore's stuff alone wouldn't have mattered,' he said. 'But the Irawa Ruby is a different proposition. Bristow will be able to ask for any special measures he likes. I didn't even know Moore had the jewel there!'

Chapter Nineteen

WHERE IS THE BARON?

The interruption on the previous night had made Lady Fauntley sleep heavily that morning, and she failed to appear at breakfast. Her good-natured chattering would have been unbearable.

Mannering was turning the affair over and over in his mind.

He had been puzzled by Bristow's appearance in Scotland and by the strong force of police. He had taken it for granted that Bristow had learned of Colonel Moore's collection and the Baron's proximity to it, and made some arrangement with the Scottish police. But there must have been a dozen men on duty, and Mannering could hardly credit that the combined police would have considered so nebulous a proposition so dangerous.

The presence of the Irawa Ruby, that pigeon's blood stone of surpassing beauty and value, explained the police attitude.

Perhaps to steal a march on rival collectors, Colonel Moore had contrived to borrow the Irawa Ruby for the *pièce de résistance* of his show, just as Fauntley had done a few weeks before.

It was now easy to understand why the strong force of police had been present. Obviously Bristow had hoped to kill the two birds with the one stone. He had been sure that the Baron would make a raid, and he had set a cunning trap.

Everything had been easy, too easy. Now, among that mud-stained collection of priceless jewels in the sack of potatoes in the stone shed at the back of the house was the ruby about which the country was shrieking – and which could send Mannering to prison for ten years or more.

Lorna sent a servant out for more newspapers, and every one had the story in heavy type. The tone of them was the same; the Baron must be caught, the Irawa Ruby *must* be found. It was one thing to play with private fortunes, one thing to pillage the wealthy, but different altogether to rob the nation. The *Courier* put it impressively.

> Every Englishman or woman who reads this newspaper has been robbed. The Baron is widening his scope, is threatening YOU. The police are making every possible effort to apprehend the notorious jewel thief, but YOUR help is wanted. If you know, if you think you know, anything that might help to identify and locate the Baron, it is your duty. . .

The Baron looked across the table to Lorna, his eyes gleaming.

'Do you feel robbed?'

'I feel worried. I don't see how we can stop them searching. Bristow suspects the ditch, and the police are working on it now.'

‘Then we can expect some action,’ said the Baron. He stood up and stretched his arms above his head. There was a curious expression in his eyes, as though he was playing with an idea and yet could not be sure that it was practical. ‘No one has called this morning?’

‘No. But Bristow won’t be long.’

‘No chance of selling him a sack of potatoes, I suppose,’ said the Baron brightly. ‘All right, call it unread. But we must get those things off the premises quickly. One sack of potatoes, worth a few thousand pounds. I . . .’

The Baron stopped, and there was a glint in his eyes now, Lorna’s mind was troubled, and her smile reluctant.

‘Sweetheart, it’s easy,’ Mannering said. ‘It’s so easy that I couldn’t see it before. Bristow will find that ditch runs here and will want to search the tank. Fine! Let him search it – *and then put the stones in again.* He can search the rest of the house as much as he wants to, but he won’t search the same place twice!’

Lorna persuaded her mother to go for a drive and Bristow was able to make a search of the house without offending anyone other than the servants, who showed their disapproval in a dozen ways, and made life for the policeman as awkward as possible.

It had started, of course, with the tank that was filled from the ditch. Even Lady Fauntley had watched that search, wide-eyed, exclaiming from time to time that it seemed impossible that the thief had been near enough to the house to drop them in the manhole. She appeared not to have the slightest inkling that Bristow was after John Mannering.

The tank was emptied and found bare of stones. Bristow could see no way in which Mannering could have brought them into the house, but the hornet’s nest had been stirred with a vengeance; the Chief Commissioner had been on the telephone to the Superintendent, and Deputy Commander Lynch was on his way to take charge of the investigations.

Bristow could not afford to leave anything undone, but the rest of the search revealed nothing. Mannering’s room was searched with exhausting thoroughness, all in vain. While it was being done Mannering cleared the kitchen of servants, emptied the sack of potatoes and put the jewels into the tank.

An annoyed, rather melancholy Tanker Tring took part in the search, with a bitterly resentful Detective Officer Ward, who had been unable to identify his assailant.

Bristow stood in Mannering’s room just after Lorna and Lady Fauntley had returned, his little moustache bristling, his fresh face pinker than usual, and his eyes sparking.

‘So you’ve managed to beat us again. But we won’t stand for the Irawa stone being stolen. I shall report all I know—’

‘What you think you know . . .’ corrected Mannering.

‘—to the Chief Constable, whether he’s a friend of yours or not. With a thing like this he’ll *have* to let us investigate.’

‘You’ll be sore when you’ve finished investigating,’ said the Baron. ‘Ffoulkes can kick hard when he wants to. Bill, you keep making the old mistake of thinking I’m the Baron; I’m afraid it’s an obsession now.’

Bristow was almost quivering with rage and frustrated anger. This was the bitterest pill he had ever taken. For when the whole truth of the night’s exploit came out . . . Bristow shuddered.

He would have to admit that he had concentrated his efforts away from The Lodge. He would have to make a statement of his suspicions of John Mannering whether he wanted to or not. It was no longer possible to keep the affair out of the Yard’s records and what the Commissioner would say when he learned Mannering was suspect Bristow hated to think. He would ask for proof, and Bristow couldn’t get it.

‘Never mind about obsessions,’ he groaned.

‘The Scottish air hasn’t improved your temper, Bill,’ mused Mannering. ‘When I first knew you, you were a peaceable kind of cove, but these days you hardly know what it is to be civil. Now don’t get high-hat again – have a cigarette.’

Bristow drew a deep breath and accepted a cigarette. Against all common sense he liked the lean, smiling, quick-witted man in front of him.

‘You’ll find you’re beaten,’ he said.

‘You’ve been saying that for so long that it must be a habit. Bill, are you an honest man?’

‘Why?’ demanded Bristow suspiciously.

‘But be honest with me, Bill. Do you think the Moore stones and the Irawa Ruby are on the premises?’

‘No.’

‘Do you think I brought them in last night?’

‘You couldn’t have done.’

‘I didn’t,’ lied the Baron. ‘I didn’t steal them, either, but I can’t expect you to believe that. You’ve made it very uncomfortable for me here, so I’m going back to London. With Lady and Miss Fauntley. I’m starting tomorrow afternoon. If I were you, I wouldn’t make any more mistakes like searching me. Follow me by all means, although the day will come when I’m tired of that.’

There was a frosty gleam in his eyes which Bristow saw and understood.

Lady Fauntley was pining for her Hugo. She had a feeling that she had been sent north to be out of the way while Hugo had negotiated some delicate business deals, and she preferred to be on the spot with comfort, if not advice. In the old days when Hugo had earned a few pounds a week they had shared everything – so why shouldn’t they now?

Consequently Mannering’s suggestion that they should go to London immediately met with an enthusiastic reception. Lucy Fauntley smiled so cheekily at Mannering that he wondered again whether she suspected his dual identity. He doubted it, and yet her manner was almost too convincingly ingenuous.

It didn't matter. He was leaving Scotland for the time being, and the Moore gems were reasonably safe.

After the search Lorna had managed to clear the kitchen quarters of the house and take out the stones, which had been wrapped in a bag before their second immersion. She hid them under a loose board in her room, one that had once been taken up by the police.

Mannering took a chance with one stone – the Irawa Ruby. He was toying with an idea that he had not mentioned to anyone else. The changing attitude in the newspaper reports had inspired it. Mannering was the Baron and the Baron was a thief, but he had no desire to upset what might be called the public conscience, and he had not dreamed the Ruby had been with Moore's collection.

They reached Perth by road. The Ruby was in Mannering's pocket, and if Bristow had decided to take another chance he would have achieved the biggest success of his career. But Bristow had burned his fingers enough, and he had persuaded himself that Mannering had not got the stones, although he knew where they were. For the time being the Baron was safe. But the newspapers ranting worried him still more. Even Lady Fauntley agreed that the Baron had gone too far.

'But wouldn't I like to have seen him, John?' she added, with her china blue eyes on Mannering. 'I wonder what he looks like – not a fine man like you, I'll warrant, but a little whipper-snapper – although I have the most romantic notions about thieves, haven't I, Lorna?'

On the train journey Mannering brought the early editions of the Northern evenings. The screaming was louder. Two national dailies had offered a reward for the recovery of the ruby or the arrest of the Baron, and Mannering was uneasily aware of the fact that several people knew him.

Didcotte, Philippa Grey and Lorna were reliable enough. But Teevens, Lobjoit and the police could make a deadly combination. Teevens was afraid of saying anything, but he might find a stool-pigeon to make a statement, might even bribe a man to perjure himself. When they reached London the biggest shock was waiting in the *Evening Star*.

> The hunt for the Baron grows stronger, but we dare say with certainty that the police cannot identify the thief. The Irawa Ruby is lost to the nation, and, we believe, it will never be returned. It is too late to prevent that. But a thorough investigation into the way in which the ruby was allowed to leave its case in the English Museum should be made. The *Evening Star* understands that this is the second time the stone has been loaned to a private collector. Lord Fauntley was allowed to take it three weeks ago. Lord Fauntley, of course, is a member of the Jewel Committee of the English Museum, and, in fact, the Committee's chairman.
>
> We do not go as far as to say that no stone should be allowed to leave the Museum for the purpose of private display, but we do

suggest a different method of release should be insisted upon. It appears that the permission of Lord Fauntley and the Curator of the Jewel House of the English Museum is sufficient. The responsibility virtually rests with a single man, and it is too great.

Lord Fauntley's generosity in allowing a rival collector to show the stone cannot be questioned. But in this case it was an expensive generosity, and it must not be repeated.

Mannering read the report with his eyes narrowed and his lips tightening all the time. It was virtually an accusation against Fauntley for letting the stone go out of his possession. Fauntley could be made the scapegoat.

Lorna understood the risk too; her expression was sombre, almost sullen.

'There's something behind this,' Mannering said. 'The tone of the article is too strong to be normal. If your father chose to take a libel case, he would almost certainly win.'

'That doesn't matter,' Lorna said. 'What matters is the identity of the man who inspired the attack.'

Mannering could almost see the moon-face of Gus Teevens, and hear the stockbroker's unctuous voice. Teevens was behind the attack, his way of taking revenge. If he was prepared to go this far with Fauntley it would not be long before he was in action against the Baron.

There were two things very clear in the Baron's mind – first, that Fauntley must take vigorous steps to obtain a full apology and withdrawal of the remarks; secondly, that the Irawa Ruby must be returned. But—how?

A smile dawned on the Baron's lips as he thought of a way in which it could be done – a sensation that would outdo the tremendous impact of the theft. More spectacular than anything the Baron had ever done before, something which could swing public opinion round in his favour again and would relieve Hugo Fauntley of opprobrium.

Lorna was wondering what was running through his mind as they went in Fauntley's Daimler to the Portland Place house. Lady Fauntley went off to telephone her Hugo. Lorna frowned, as she looked at the Baron. 'What is it, John?'

'A beautiful thought,' said Mannering softly. 'One that will cut Teevens's tail . . .'

'You think it is Teevens?'

'Of course. And it will make the *Evening Star* howl. Let them howl. Your father can sue them when this is over.'

'Would it be wise?' questioned Lorna. 'There'll be a strong feeling about it. The Irawa Ruby's as important now as the Koh-i-noor Diamond, and the papers are getting hysterical.'

'I don't promise to tell you what I'm going to do,' said Mannering. 'But don't worry.'

'John . . . Lorna! John . . . John!'

Mannering swung towards the door of the room as Lady Fauntley's voice came, high-pitched with anxiety. She was hurrying from the library, and her

face was very pale.

'Oh, my dears, thank goodness you're here. You'll do something, John, I'm sure – tell Hugo not to be such a fool. I always said it wasn't safe to leave him alone.'

'What's happened?' asked Lorna anxiously.

Lady Fauntley's eyes were on Mannering, pleading.

'All that dreadful story in the papers and the country up in arms against poor Hugo – what possessed him to lend Moore the ruby I don't know. But he's so generous really, although perhaps you wouldn't think it. And now he's gone to France – flew over this afternoon, John – and *now* what do you think the public will say?'

What the evening papers thought was obvious when the next editions came along. *The Evening Star,* still prompted by Teevens – Mannering was right there, for Teevens had a friend on the board of directors – came out with a heavy headline:

Lord Fauntley's Mystery Journey to Paris

There was no statement, but there was a strong innuendo. Most readers glancing through the headlines would associate two ideas. The ruby had gone without trace, and Lord Fauntley, who had allowed it to leave the Museum, had left England.

Worse followed. The *Evening Star* reported his lordship's heavy business losses, and gave rumours of his attempts to sell his own collection; the added weight of the suggestions and rumours was enough to have blackmailed Fauntley for as long as the ruby was missing.

Fauntley's solicitors spent several hours with Lady Fauntley, a worried but self-possessed little woman strong in defence of her husband. Writs were to be applied for against the *Evening Star* and other papers, but unless the ruby was found the writs would be useless to save Fauntley's reputation. Deputy Commissioner Lynch changed his mind about going to Scotland and made preparations for a trip to France, while the Surêté Nationale was watching the peer, who so far was unaware of the storm about his head. Fauntley had gone to Paris simply on business.

Meanwhile Mannering was making preparations for the biggest effort of his life so far, one that could undo the damage that had been done.

He refused to tell Lorna, for she would want to help him, and it would be disastrous for the Fauntleys if she was caught. There was more than a chance of being caught, but Mannering had to risk it, for Lorna, for Fauntley, for himself.

If the Irawa Ruby was found in its case at the English Museum the whole campaign would collapse.

Chapter Twenty

MR. TEEVENS ANTICIPATES

Augustus Teevens and Matthew Lobjoit sat opposite each other in the stockbroker's flat. They were feeling reasonably pleased with themselves, for although they had lost a great deal of money, each still had a fortune. Both had looked for a way to stop Mannering, something to prevent him from using their own methods against them. In short, they were afraid of blackmail.

Teevens had come to the conclusion that Mannering was the Baron. He had put the private enquiry agent, Morley – Lantern-Jaw – on to Mannering to try to catch him out, but Morley had been sleeping when the great opportunity had come.

Yet Teevens had seen his chance.

He had known of the arrangement between Moore and Hugo Fauntley. He had suspected that Mannering's reason for going north was to steal Moore's collection, and had seen the possibility of linking Fauntley with the disappearance of the ruby.

It was a fact that both Bristow and Teevens had been convinced that the Baron would get the stone.

Everything had worked out as Teevens had desired. The *Evening Star* was a powerful weapon, and the other papers lifted what they had not been able to find out for themselves. Fauntley was suspect to the man in the street. The Baron would be as worried as if his own name and reputation were in danger. So Gus Teevens sat snugly in a well-upholstered armchair, with his fat hands folded across his bulging stomach.

'They're sorry they worried us, Matthew. Mannering will be more careful after this.'

'If he has an opportunity,' said Lobjoit slyly.

'You're thinking that we might be able to find a case against him. If Morley had been on the ball, we would have had Mannering by now.'

'Supposing Fauntley proves that he hasn't got the jewel?'

'He hasn't got it, you fool. He'll probably issue a writ, and we may have to pay out a few thousands. But he will never convince the public, and that is what we want. Public opinion, my dear Matthew, will do Fauntley more damage than anything else. Once that's done we will start a campaign against Mannering – a whispering campaign.'

'Mannering will know where it comes from.'

'I shall absolutely deny all knowledge,' boomed Teevens. 'So will you. Mannering will be in a cleft stick. He alarmed me, I'll admit that, but I've recovered, and Mannering is going to learn that.'

'You'll have to be careful,' urged Lobjoit. He was a pessimistic man by nature.

‘I’m always careful,’ Teevens assured him. ‘Mannering will soon be on the run, very soon indeed. A spot more whisky? To celebrate.’

The Chief Commissioner, Sir David Ffoulkes, listened to Superintendent Bristow’s story in silence. When it was finished he leaned back – he was a large man, who had been in the same Cambridge boat as John Mannering – and eyed the detective narrowly.

‘And how long have you suspected Mannering, Bristow?’

‘About eight months, sir.’

‘You should have told me before,’ said Ffoulkes. ‘No, don’t apologise – I know why you didn’t. Lynch knew about it, of course.’ Bristow had not said so, but the Chief Commissioner knew his men. ‘Well, I’m not going to say that I believe you. I think you’ve probably made a mistake.’

‘Mr. Mannering and Lord Fauntley are closely associated,’ Bristow said. ‘Things don’t look too good for Fauntley.’

Ffoulkes cocked his head on one side.

‘I can believe almost anything of Mannering,’ he admitted. ‘He always was a daredevil, and he had an off-beat sense of values even in the old days. But there is a big mistake about Fauntley, and the *Evening Star* will pay heavy sums in damages. All right, Bristow. Keep at it. Don’t take any notice of the newspapers – I don’t need to advise you of that, though – and watch Mannering carefully.’

The last words came out almost casually, but they cheered Bill Bristow a great deal. The Commissioner was obviously half-convinced that Mannering and the Baron were identical.

Mr. Jonathan Didcotte entered the drawing-room of The Towers and smiled at Philippa Grey, who, at Guy’s earnest plea, had come to spend a few days as a house guest. Jonathan Didcotte was pleased by his son’s interest. There was a great deal to admire in Philippa Grey.

Philippa was reading the *Courier’s* front page, with the usual story about the Baron, that contemptible thief who could take the nation’s property. Her young face was set, and she was flushed when she threw the paper down.

‘I don’t believe it!’ she said aloud. Didcotte thought there was something more than a romantic liking for the Baron in her attitude. Didcotte, knowing Mannering was the Baron, and the connection between Mannering and Philippa, put two and two together.

His drawling voice broke the silence. Philippa swung round in alarm.

‘So you don’t believe Mannering took the ruby, do you, Philippa?’

Her eyes widened into pools of alarm.

‘Mannering?

‘Shhh! There are servants.’

‘But—but you *know* . . .’

‘I’ve known for some time – even before he visited me. But I didn’t realise you knew. How did you find out?’

Philippa explained quickly, and the story of Alice Purnall’s necklace was

repeated yet again. The American's grey eyes were smiling as she finished.

'And you don't believe that the same man would take the Irawa Ruby, do you?'

'Do you?'

'Well, I don't know. I don't think so, but probably he didn't know it was there. He'd be wise enough, would Mannering, not to do anything which would bring everyone against him, although I won't answer for his scruples. The thing is, what to do?'

'We can't do anything,' Philippa said, and Didcotte thought she was very close to tears.

'I shall tell Mannering he can rely on us if he wants help. Oh, I know he robbed me of a lot of jewels, but he did me a service I shan't forget for a long time. Now stop worrying and go and find Guy. Don't tell him Mannering is the Baron, though. Guy can still feel that punch on the chin!'

Hugo Fauntley paced the room of his Paris hotel, muttering to himself. He had just received a copy of the London *Evening Star,* and if Fauntley had ever raged, he did so then.

He knew that Teevens had a friend who was a director of the paper. He also knew that he had nothing to do with the disappearance of the Irawa Ruby. On the other hand, this business trip would look more than suspicious.

Only one man could help him, thought Fauntley, and that was Mannering.

Lord Fauntley suddenly stopped thinking, and stared at a water-colour, so dazed that he hardly knew whether he was on his head or his heels.

Mannering had helped him before – after *the Baron* had broken into Lobjoit's office. Mannering had been near Moore's place – and *the Baron* had paid a visit. Mannering – the Baron? It just wasn't possible – it couldn't be possible, and yet . . .

Thoughts began to flood through the peer's mind, of the thefts the Baron had made before when Mannering had been near at hand. The Baron was Mannering!

'The—unmitigated—scoundrel!' cried Lord Fauntley aloud. 'The . . .'

He stopped, for he remembered all that he owed Mannering and the Baron, if Mannering was the Baron. The man might be slick-fingered, but he was not a rogue by ordinary standards.

The telephone rang.

Fauntley stepped to the instrument hastily, afraid to hear that reporters were waiting downstairs. It was surprising they had not started worrying him yet. There was no need to fear, however, for Mannering's deep voice came over the wires from London.

'John!'

'Hugo, don't talk, just listen. Both the police and the Press will be after you – don't say a word. Just maintain a dignified silence. Will you?'

'I—but, John . . .'

‘There mustn’t be any buts,’ said Mannering sharply. ‘Teevens has put you on a spot, and you’ll have a job to get off it. You can do it as well as any man.’

‘Listen, John. If Teevens has done this, how can we kill the rumour? Damn it,’ exclaimed Lord Fauntley, with a sudden wave of indignation; ‘it’s practically accusing me—we!—of stealing the Irawa Ruby. It’s disgraceful, but circumstances have helped to make me look guilty. It is all very well to say no, but . . .’

‘I wasn’t saying no,’ interrupted Mannering. ‘If you’ll do what I advise – say nothing about the affair, except to call it preposterous – I’ll see you through. Will you?’

‘Yes, of course. But . . .’

‘I’ll ring you as soon as I can,’ said Mannering, and the line went dead.

Fauntley stared at the telephone, took a silk handkerchief from his pocket and wiped a brow that was wet and red. He was still doing it when the door of his suite opened and Lucy Fauntley rushed in. She was dressed for outdoors and her hat was a little awry, and she literally threw herself in her husband’s arms.

‘Lucy!’

‘Hugo! It’s all so hateful, and I didn’t know whether you would want to come back, although I thought you would, but here I am in case something’s gone wrong. Do I look *too* much of a wreck—I came by air—oh, Hugo, you’re positively *ill!’*

‘What on earth made you come here?’ demanded Fauntley dazedly.

‘I simply couldn’t keep away, Hugo.’

Fauntley looked more pleased with life than he had for a long time past.

‘Of course not, my dear. Of course not. I—I can’t say how much it means to me. I—oh, *hallo?’*

There was a tap on the door. It opened and an attendant walked in with a card on a tray. Fauntley took the card, read it and then stared at his wife. The inscription ran: *Deputy Commander A. Lynch New Scotland Yard*

Colonel Arnold Moore finished reading the last account of the robbery and scowled at a blank wall. He had drunk a great deal more whisky than was good for him. The shock of the theft had been enough, the loss of his own jewels considerable, but the disappearance of the Irawa Ruby was the final blow. He had applied to the police for protection as a formality, never dreaming that his impregnable strong-room would be easily broken open.

Like Fauntley, Moore had his pride. In this case the settlement from an insurance would hardly have satisfied it. But he had taken it for granted that the ruby had been insured: it had, but only while at the Museum. Moore should have insured the stone from the moment it left the case at the Museum to the moment when it had been returned. It was his responsibility, some hundred thousand pounds’ worth, and he was at his wit’s end. He hadn’t the money; to get it he must sell some of his precious collection or use the insurance money on the other stolen jewels. A dead loss, in any case.

And there were these rumours about Fauntley.

He had approached Fauntley a few weeks before and the peer had acquiesced with surprisingly little argument. At the time Moore had not been suspicious, but now he was wondering whether it had been a trick.

Arnold Moore could see no way in which he could avoid paying for the stone. He doubted whether anything would be found to prove the case against Fauntley. He did not realise how much his fortune depended on Mannering.

After he had telephoned Fauntley, Mannering prepared to make a surreptitious visit to the English Museum. The idea had grown now until he looked on it as inevitable. He would get the Irawa Ruby back to the Museum, whatever the cost.

There was something in the irony of the suggestion that appealed to the gambler in him. He had broken into country houses and town houses and found it easy, and invariably he had brought something out with him. Now he would break into the English Museum, and leave something there.

It was a joke he could share only with Lorna, and that would make it perfect. It gave him a new zest for life; it made him hum to himself as he left his flat and hurried down the stairs. It made him smile widely at the cabby who pulled up a moment later.

He saw the plain-clothes man who followed him in a police car, but left the cab at the Mansion House, as useful for his purpose as Piccadilly. He slipped into the tube station and up a subway, with the man still on his heels. Three minutes were enough to leave the detective standing at one subway while Mannering walked briskly along Cannon Street, and jumped on a bus for Aldgate.

Half an hour after leaving his flat he was with Flick Leverson. Leverson could only shake hands and say: ‘You’ve surpassed yourself, my friend.’

‘You mean the Irawa Ruby?’

‘Of course.’

‘I found it by accident,’ confessed the Baron. ‘I’m going to put it back, Flick.’

Leverson looked at him steadily, then drew a deep breath and asked: ‘Can I help?’

Just that, and no more; and the Baron knew that even Leverson had wished the Irawa Ruby still at the Museum.

‘You certainly can. I’ve come without much in the way of disguise’—Mannering had slipped his rubber cheek-pads in his mouth and had darkened the skin beneath his eyes—’and I need something more effective. To last from now until tomorrow morning. Can you suggest anyone to do it?’

‘I’ve the very man for you,’ said Leverson; ‘an old stage make-up artist. Would you like it done here?’

‘If it’s possible.’

‘I will use the telephone,’ said Leverson, ‘then we’ll have tea while we are waiting for my friend to come. You needn’t ask his name.’

Just forty minutes afterwards the Baron was sitting opposite a mirror in Flick Leverson's bedroom while a small, tubby man was wrapping a towel about his shoulders. The man worked quickly, using paint sparingly, trimming Mannering's hair, dyeing it a little grey at the temples. He was a quiet worker and uttered few words.

Soon, Mannering was staring into the face of a stranger.

'It's perfect,' he congratulated.

The tubby little make-up man bowed delightedly.

'It is good, yes. It will last for twenty-four hours, although you must not wash your face.'

'You certainly won't see me washing the paint off in the middle of the performance,' Mannering assured him, and the gratified man bowed himself out of the room.

Meanwhile Leverson had been busy.

Mannering found a ready-made suit of dark grey, a pair of toney brown shoes and grey socks waiting for him. They fitted fairly well, although when dressed Mannering looked nothing like the well-groomed man about town who had entered the room. It put the finishing touch to the disguise.

Leverson shook hands as his caller went to the door.

'I'll keep your clothes here, my friend, and the best possible luck.'

'I'll need it,' said the Baron.

He made straight for the English Museum, and had half an hour to spare before it was closed. In the Jewel House quite a crowd was gathered near the case where the Irawa Ruby was usually on show. The case could be opened without trouble, and he could replace the stone easily enough without making it apparent that the case had been forcibly opened. But . . .

Damn it, he could not put it back in its case!

Just in time, Mannering saw one of the blind spots that came occasionally, mistakes that he so often nearly made. Obviously the case would have been examined a dozen times since the robbery. The only thing was to put the gem back in the safe at the Museum.

Mannering had been playing with the idea of getting the ruby back and trying to create the impression that it had never been stolen. He thought that way would be best for Fauntley, but if he put the ruby back furtively and Fauntley denied that it had never left the Museum (he could pretend that Moore had been given a replica) it would weaken Fauntley's case immensely. The *Evening Star,* with Teevens behind it, would make great play of the fact that Fauntley had magically produced the jewel stolen by the Baron. The consequences would be fatal. The Baron had stolen the ruby, the Baron would put it back; and in the morning the Baron would write to the dailies and claim that he had not known the Irawa gem had been with Moore's collection. The very sensation would take the limelight off Fauntley, who would have time and opportunity to handle the affair with the *Evening Star* and consolidate his reputation.

The Baron felt happier: there was nothing hazy about his plan, it was clear-cut, definite, a matter for action only. He spent the half-hour at the

Museum examining the doors and the windows, and by the time the attendants were clearing the big halls he had his plan prepared.

It was a warm day, and the embargo against washing was irritating; so was the fact that he could not go any place where he was known. He dined at a small restaurant in Soho. Midnight was the best time for working, and he was fidgety for the next few hours.

He was in strange places, keeping out of sight, making sure his disguise was not forced to suffer severe scrutiny. He spent two hours in a picture-house, already beginning to feel the excitement which always came at the outset of a job.

If he could talk with Lorna or Didcotte, even Philippa Grey, he would feel better. If he had even been able to spend the evening at the Elan he would not have endured this nerve-racking suspense. Ten minutes before midnight he walked through the streets of Kensington towards the vast building of the English Museum.

The night was dark, and the side-gate he chose to operate on was in a deserted spot. He could hear an occasional footfall, but none came near. He worked quickly. He made more noise than he wanted, but the gate was open at last. He slipped his pick-lock into his pocket and, with a fresh kit of tools prepared that day, walked across the hard courtyard towards the nearest window. The squat building towered above him and seemed to stretch endlessly on either side, but the only sound as he reached the window was the distant hum of traffic and the slight padding of his own feet on the ground.

Chapter Twenty-one

RESTITUTION

The Baron had avoided the main roadside as much as he could when he had reached the Museum, and he was well away from it now.

The Jewel House had no windows, but there was a window to a passage near by and he had seen it during the afternoon. The heavy iron bars and the thick plate glass, frosted and reinforced, would not be easy to get through.

He worked on the bars quickly, using an acid preparation to loosen the concrete. He had two bars out in five minutes, and there was space to climb through. The window was a different proposition. The thick glass would not be easily broken, and the wire reinforcement was almost unbreakable. The Baron had relied on one thing – the putty at the edges.

He ran his chisel down the putty and it came away in small hard pieces with little noise. Still the silence was about him, and he worked in the darkness, his blue mask and gloves covering his face and hands, his coat-collar turned up so that he merged into the background of dark grey stone.

When the window-frame was bare of putty, the Baron used his chisel to slice away the wood, for the glass was let well into the window-frame. The seconds ticked into minutes and all the time the only sound was the cutting noise of the chisel and the scraping of wood.

The Baron began to work faster, caring less for the noise he might create, fearful of the patrol guards coming round.

Once the sound of a footfall came near him: he straightened up, ready for anything, on the other side of the railings a policeman walked stolidly, glancing right and left, his face a pale blur in the gloom.

Mannering started again, chipping the wood off three sides of the frame. He had it finished at last, but he knew it had taken too much precious time. The sheet of glass itself was heavy and difficult to handle, eight feet high and five feet across. He could only let it downward gently, fearful all the time of losing his hold and sending it crashing to the courtyard.

But it was on the ground at last, and he was able to rest it against the outer wall.

He climbed over the windowsill quickly, not stopping to collect his tools; if anyone passed and looked in, the broken window would be enough to raise the alarm. He found himself in the wide, dark hall, and even the padding of his rubber heels seemed to echo.

The air was heavy and oppressive, and the building seemed filled with a murmuring of sound that had no explanation. Right and left he could see cases standing upright, and once he caught a glimpse of the white bones of a skeleton.

He halted in front of it for a moment, knowing that it was mad to feel

jumpy; but he could not stop himself. The thing was inside its glass case, but it gave Mannering a feeling of nervousness.

He went forward slowly; the sense of direction that had been such a boon a hundred times before seemed to desert him, and he blundered into a stuffed animal standing by the wall. It thudded against the wall, and the echo went round and round, cavernous in that great mausoleum of a place.

The walls and ceiling seemed to close down on Mannering as he waited tensely, half afraid that he would hear the fast-approaching footsteps of the guards and yet worried more by the strange something, the atmosphere that he could not properly understand.

He was out of the range of the window now, and he could use his torch without the risk of being seen from outside. He switched it on, and the first beams shone over the bones of a prehistoric brute that did as much in death to make a man jump as it could have done in life.

Mannering cast the beams of the torch around slowly. The place was eerie enough to upset anyone's nerve. The beam of Mannering's torch played over the glass-enclosed faces of mummies and their swathed bandages, over skeletons, human and animal, over strange assortments of bones hanging from the otherwise bare walls.

He had marked a stuffed fully-grown ape standing by an alcove opposite the Jewel House door, and he found it at last, rubbing his hand across the hairy face when he had expected to find the bare wall. He withdrew his fingers quickly, stepped straight across to the opposite wall and found the door.

He was chary of using the torch, for he was not sure how often the men came round on their patrols, while he guessed they would move silently. But he flashed it on the lock of the door, which he had studied as carefully as possible that afternoon.

It was solid and up to date, a rarity in the English Museum, but it was not an insuperable obstacle. He would have to use gelignite again, but that did not worry him.

He needed three minutes from the moment the door was open to the moment he started on the journey back, and there could be Bedlam. No sound came through the darkness, but that strange muttering – rats, had he but known it, behind the thick walls.

He drew the gelignite from its pocket in his tool-kit now. One small stick would be enough. He stuffed it into the keyhole, hanging a thirty second fuse. He was on tiptoe, his eyes gleaming brightly, his lips parted, and beneath his mask his teeth shining.

Still no sound.

He struck a match, and the hiss of the flare seemed like thunder, echoing about the high passage. The fuse spluttered quickly, glowing very red and sending its white streaks of flames. Mannering backed away quickly, hiding his face. The *boom* of the explosion came with a devastating roar, and Mannering was half-blinded and deafened. For at the vital moment he had uncovered his eyes. Blinking the tears from his eyes, he hurried forward.

There was still a rumbling about the walls and passages. He reached the door, which was swinging open, and rushed into the room, switching on the light as he went. There was no need for secrecy now.

The case where the Irawa Ruby had rested for so many weeks was in the centre of the big room. He reached it in a few long strides and wrenched the lock open. He had the ruby out in a flash; to its setting was tied a small card with six block-lettered words on it.

The Baron thrust it into its place and swung round.

Seconds counted, seconds were precious. He reached the door.

And then he stopped dead still.

Three men were approaching, two from the direction of the window by which he had entered, one from the other. All had thick clubs, and one had a gun. The single man had the gun. He raised it as the Baron rushed at him. The first bullet hummed past his head, but the second failed to come, for the Baron reached the man and sent the gun flying out of his hand.

He was moving very fast, with the two guards in full cry after him. Nothing mattered now but escape, escape! There were whistles shrilling and alarms clanging stridently; voices were raised in anger and bewilderment, seeming to come from every corner, every wall.

The Baron was running towards the centre of the big hall. He was afraid of losing himself in the maze of passages. He saw the stairs; down one flight two men were running, but the other was empty.

He turned right, jumping up the stairs, caring nothing, thinking nothing, but of the one thing – escape.

Escape, escape!

At the first landing he had outpaced his pursuers, and was twenty yards ahead. He darted towards the left and the windows.

He still carried his jemmy in his pocket. It was cumbersome, but he needed it. Ahead of him was a large window, bare of bars, for it was fitted high in the wall. He reached it, smashing the jemmy downwards, and as the glass crashed he heard the half-frenzied shouts of the men behind him.

The Baron swung round, the smashed window at his back, four racing attendants after him now. A club hurtled through the air, and flew over his shoulder. A second struck his foot.

His mask was still up, but his eyes were blazing and there was an unholy light in them – the light of battle, the most desperate battle of the Baron's career. Luck could not help him now, nor could strategy. Speed and force were his only weapons.

To his right was a chair. The guards were at the head of the stairs as he picked the chair up and hurled it at them.

They scattered, two to the left, and two down the stairs. Those on the stairs caught the flying chair and went downward, the bumping and clattering on the stairs adding to the din. But the Baron was still facing two resolute armed men.

He saw a gun flash as he went forward to the attack. Attack, attack, always attack!

The report of the first shot echoed high into the ceiling of the great hall; the second sent a bullet stubbing near the Baron's toes; but the third hit the ceiling for the Baron sent the man backward. The second guard closed with him. They struggled like madmen, and there was a light of insanity in the guard's eyes. The Baron was fighting with the ruthlessness of a machine, but timing his punches and saving his strength.

An uppercut sent his opponent reeling backward and crashing into the rails. But half-a-dozen other men were rushing up the main stairs towards the landing.

Mannering reached the window and grabbed the jemmy from the floor. A bullet smacked close to him. The blue mask gave him away as the Baron – the Baron, for whom the country was seeking and whom the nation despised.

He smashed two jagged pieces of glass from the bottom of the window, and climbed through.

Outside was the brooding darkness, not even a star to light the skies. He had no idea how high he was, and he saw nothing about him. Only darkness. He stood poised on the windowsill of thick granite. Behind him the men were racing and shouting, and already he could hear the shouts in the streets outside, could hear the thudding of footsteps from the road.

There was a dim glow now from the light behind him. He stood poised, wondering whether he dare jump and risk a broken limb. If only he could see!

His hands were stretched out as far as they could go along the wall, and suddenly he jabbed his fingers against something that protruded. The Baron's muscles went taut. A drain-pipe!

He leaned his weight against it; he had to take risks, and he hardly felt fear. The pipe stood his weight. He gripped it with one hand, then found purchase with the second.

Slowly, desperately, he dragged his foot from the sill and forced it against the wall, suddenly he slipped. The weight on his arms was excruciating, but he held on to the pipe and hung straight down. Every sense was acute. He could hear voices below, yet not directly beneath him. He shinned down, barking his knees on the wall painfully.

The men were at the windows now and beams of light were stabbing out from torches, odd and eerie through the darkness. They were straight down at first, and the Baron could see a circle of light a few yards beneath him.

His toes touched the ground, his knees bent. He staggered out and straightened up, and as he did so a burly figure materialised out of the darkness.

'*Now* then!' There was a gruff note of triumph in the policeman's voice, and a hand dropped heavily on the Baron's shoulder. But the policeman made a mistake, and thought his man was scared. His stomach made a target impossible to miss, and every ounce of strength went into the Baron's blow.

It struck the man like a steam-hammer, and the anguished gasp reached the skies. The hand fell from the Baron's shoulder, but now he could see two

or three vague figures in front of him and on all sides.

He drew a deep breath and plunged forward.

Lights were springing up from all the windows, and the darkness was broken by a pale white gleam. The Baron was heading like a man possessed for a dark corner away from the main gates. The courtyard echoed to the thud of footsteps, and the sound of his own pounding feet was hardly noticeable. He reached the railings. He was on the main roadside, and the street lamps gave light enough now. Three or four people were hurrying towards the gates, not looking at the railings. The Baron waited until the last had passed, then took his chance.

He hauled himself up, every muscle in his body protesting, but he reached the top, then stood for a moment on the rails.

If he tried to climb down his clothes would catch; he had to jump. It was an eight-foot drop, and he was practically exhausted. He landed steadily, then plunged to the left. The shouts behind him were growing more distant. Cabs and cars were passing him. On and on, the sweat in his eyes, his arms working mechanically, every moment like the last.

He pushed a comb through his hair, tidied himself as best he could while he lurked in the shadows and then walked quickly along the street towards the High Street. A cab was passing, and he beckoned it.

'Aldgate Pump,' he said, and climbed in.

At nine o'clock next morning Sir David Ffoulkes, an Assistant Commissioner, Superintendent William Bristow and Detective Sergeant Tanker Tring were gathered round the Commissioner's desk. On a virgin blotting pad was the Irawa Ruby, with the brief message still tied to it. They had tested the stone and the card for fingerprints, but had found none, although the message was there for all to see. It read: *'With the compliments of the Baron.'*

Chapter Twenty-two

NO ALIBI

There's just this,' Bristow said doggedly. 'Mannering wasn't in his flat last night. I had two men watching it all the time, and I'm sure of that. He disappeared at Mansion House yesterday afternoon, and he didn't return to Bloom Street.'

'You've thought of the Elan?' asked Ffoulkes.

'His key wasn't taken from the desk, I had two men watching there. Mannering wasn't caught, perhaps, but Mannering has no alibi.'

'A lot of people in that position,' murmured Ffoulkes.

Bristow touched his nicotine-stained moustache.

'I know, sir, but there's ample ground for suspecting Mannering. I suggest that he's detained for questioning.'

'You have no proof,' objected Ffoulkes. 'I know it's maddening, Bristow, but we can't arrest Mannering on suspicion simply in the hope that he will slip up. You might be wrong.'

'I'm as sure Mannering's the Baron as I'm sure my name's Bristow,' said Bristow stubbornly.

'Yes, Bristow, and I'm inclined to agree with you. We can't authorise a warrant, and you know it. But I'll overlook any minor breaches of regulations. You can put a call out for Mannering, too. He's wanted to give evidence of identity, shall we say?'

It was a partial victory.

'At once, sir, thank you,' Bristow said, 'is that all?'

Ffoulkes leaned back in his chair with his eyes half closed. He was tapping the Irawa Ruby and speaking very slowly.

'No. Leave nothing undone to catch the Baron, whether he is Mannering or not. This'—he tapped the message—'is going to swing the Press and public round in his favour, and you've some three hours to work.'

'Can't we keep it from the Press?' asked Bristow.

'Will the Baron let us?' demanded Ffoulkes.

Bristow was telling himself that there was a limit to liking and a limit to friendliness towards the Baron, who would certainly swing the whole public round in his favour. He knew that his own suggestion of keeping the return of the Irawa Ruby from the papers was impracticable. Probably the Museum authorities were being interviewed by reporters, and Bristow hated to think of tomorrow's newspaper headlines.

This time, Bristow assured himself, there was one good thing the Baron had no alibi. As soon as a haul was made he showed himself and started to prove to Bill Bristow why it was impossible for him to be the Baron. This

time Mannering was keeping out of the way, and Bristow read nervousness and lack of confidence in his continued non-appearance.

At ten o'clock next morning, when the call was going out to the police patrols for Mannering, and when his description had been flashed to every station and every patrol-man in England, Mannering slipped out of Flick Leverson's front door and walked quickly towards Aldgate High Street.

All signs of disguise were gone: he was John Mannering, immaculate, apparently self-possessed, and with the gleam in his eyes that so infuriated old Bill Bristow,

Mannering was fully prepared for trouble.

The Museum raid had been the most daring of his career, and the irony of the situation appealed to him now. He had never felt the possibility of being caught, once he had managed to get rid of the proceeds of the haul.

This time there had been no proceeds – but he was in a tighter corner than ever. He could be charged with breaking and entering the English Museum, causing damage and bodily harm – but not with theft. If they did get him and the first charge wasn't theft it would be the most ironic thing in the world.

A tall, heavily-built policeman was walking towards him.

Mannering's heart jumped, but he looked straight ahead. The man frowned and eyed him. Mannering quickened his pace, reached Aldgate station and slipped through the side entrance.

He walked to the front quickly so that he was able to look down the road in the policeman's wake, and he saw that the man was coming back.

Mannering stepped out of his cover, and almost banged into the policeman. The man jumped.

'Excuse me, sir.'

He was civil, anyhow!

'Yes?' said Mannering easily.

'Are you Mr. John Mannering?'

'That's right,' said Mannering, and the little pulse in his forehead was beating nineteen to the dozen.

'I *thought* so, sir. There's a call out for you. Would you be good enough to go to the Yard, sir, to see Superintendent Bristow? He wants some information, sir.'

'Does he indeed?' asked the Baron, and he was smiling now with relief, for no matter what Bristow had suspected he had not sent out a 'detain call'. Mannering could imagine the Superintendent's fury, and he wondered whether Bristow was waiting in the Yard at that moment, hoping he would go. 'I'll call on him, constable.'

Mannering got a taxi, reached Bloom Street, paid off the cab, and almost walked into the lean Tanker Tring, a doleful Tanker whose hat was even lower over his ears than usual.

'Not tired yet?' enquired the Baron.

'Morning, Mr. Mannering. Mr. Bristow wants you.'

'Where, Tring?'

‘At the Yard, sir.’ Tanker could not get out of the habit of years, and he called all gentlemen ‘sir’.

‘If he wants me he can come here,’ Mannering said.

If Tring insisted on his going to the Yard he would know that Bristow had something he could call a case. If Tring did not insist . . . That tell-tale pulse in his temple was ticking now, and he stared at the detective blandly.

‘I’ll tell him, sir,’ said Tanker Tring at last, and the Baron smiled and passed on, so relieved that he felt elated.

He reached the flat and made himself coffee. By the time he had finished it there was a tap on the door, and he opened it quickly. Bristow stood there, his light grey suit as spick and span as ever, and the rose in his buttonhole fresh.

‘Good morning, Bill!’ said Mannering.

‘Morning,’ grunted Bristow, and stepped in. ‘Where were you last night?’

‘Out,’ answered Mannering.

Bristow was dour and determined, and Mannering knew he would have to go carefully, seeing the danger as clearly as Bristow saw it. Bristow might force him into proving he *hadn’t* been at the Museum.

‘I know. Where were you?’

‘Just out.’ Mannering’s smile was brittle.

‘I see,’ said Bristow slowly, and then his voice hardened and his words came quickly. ‘It’s not good enough, Mannering, understand that. You were at the English Museum last night, and . . .’

‘Where?’ demanded the Baron, and the nuance of surprise was so good that Bristow was almost taken off his guard.

‘The English Museum,’ he repeated quickly. ‘You were seen.’

‘That man must have had marvellous eyes,’ said Mannering, but the room felt stifling. ‘I was nowhere near the Museum, Bill.’

‘Weren’t you? The Baron broke in and—’

‘Oi . . . Oi!’ cried the Baron; now his eyes were gleaming, and Bristow had the sinking feeling that Mannering could squeeze out yet again. ‘You’re still mixing me up with the Baron, Bill . . .’

‘Oh, blast you!’ burst Bill Bristow. ‘You’re the Baron, even Ffoulkes knows it now. The report’s gone through, and there’s enough evidence to justify a detentive arrest. Mannering. When you’re under arrest, you’ll have to prove you weren’t at the Museum last night.’

Mannering was standing very still. For a moment Bristow thought he had him beaten, but Mannering’s voice came very grimly.

‘I see, Bill. So you’ve taken your pet theory to high places. You’re trying to work the wrong way. A man is innocent until he is proved guilty.’

‘I can detain the innocent.’

‘And you’re thinking of detaining me.’

‘I am,’ Bristow said grimly, ‘unless you can explain your movements last night.’

‘Where’s your warrant?’

‘It’s useless to keep arguing. I can get a warrant in half an hour, and half

an hour makes no difference. You'll never get away, because you're watched all the time.'

'I've been watched so often that it's a habit,' said Mannering, 'and your men aren't the experts they should be. I won't come without a warrant.'

Bristow began to smile. He believed he could get Ffoulkes to issue the warrant on this.

Someone tapped on the door.

The sound came so suddenly and unexpectedly that it made Bristow jump and Tring swing round. But Mannering moved first and fastest. He reached the door and opened it quickly. Then he dropped back, for Mr. Jonathan Didcotte walked into the room.

Chapter Twenty-three

SAID THE BARON

The thing happened in less than ten seconds, but an age seemed to pass. Mannering saw Didcotte's smile and read in it understanding. He saw the early evening paper in Didcotte's hand and saw the headlines:

The Baron Returns Irawa Ruby

And while Didcotte was watching him, while Bristow was half afraid that Mannering would find a trick, while Tring was wondering whether he dare tell the American he could not stay, the Baron uttered the words on which his future depended.

'Hallo, Didcotte, I've been expecting you. Tell this fool of a policeman we were together last night, will you?'

And the room seemed to go tense. Bristow's eyes were glittering frostily, his hands clenched; Didcotte was still smiling, but the surprise was more than he expected; only the Baron seemed completely at ease.

'Mannering, it's useless!' snapped Bristow, but Mannering swung round with a sudden fury.

'Useless, is it? You bloody fool, what do you think I kept silent for? Because I'd been to the musuem? You must be crazy. I was out with Didcotte until two o'clock last night, and where we were doesn't concern you!'

Bristow drew a deep breath. The worst of it was that it might be true – he could not be sure with the Baron. He looked at Didcotte, telling himself he would not know whether the American was telling the truth or not.

'It's all right, Mannering – Mary knows where I was. She's quite broad-minded. But what's the trouble?'

Superintendent William Bristow, the most disgruntled man in England, left the Baron's flat ten minutes afterwards. Didcotte had given the Baron his alibi, and although Bristow did not trust it, he could certainly prove nothing to the contrary.

He did try in the next few hours to trace Didcotte's movements on the previous night. He failed, for Didcotte had been out by himself until the early hours.

Bristow took his report to the Commissioner, and Ffoulkes nodded thoughtfully.

'I thought he'd have an alibi, but I'm coming round to your way of thinking. The Baron will have to be more careful in future.'

'He's so damned smart,' grunted Bristow.

'Not so smart that he won't slip up,' said Ffoulkes. 'Keep at him. Oh, Mr. Lynch has telephoned from Paris. Lord Fauntley refuses to say a word – to

him or the Press. I think we were wrong with Fauntley, but we'll see. Anyhow, the ruby's safe. Have you seen the papers?'

Bristow shook his head, and the Chief Commissioner passed an evening paper across his desk.

Bristow stared down at it, the muscles of his face working. He had feared it, but it was worse than he had expected, for the paper eulogised the Baron, who was on his pedestal again.

'It's lucky I came in,' smiled Jonathan Didcotte.

'Lucky's one word for it,' said the Baron. 'What made you come?'

Didcotte's eyes crinkled at the corners.

'The Museum story,' he said. 'I learned quite accidentally that Philippa Grey knew both your identities. I learned all about the Purnall necklace, and rather liked the story. Besides, I owe you something myself.'

Mannering smiled, and lit a cigarette. His relief was still making him feel dazed.

'What actually made you come?'

'Well, Philippa and I both wanted to help,' said Didcotte simply. 'Things were looking black when you took that ruby. I called here last night several times. I was going to suggest that you took it back! I came straight round to congratulate you.'

Mannering chuckled.

'Thanks,' he said. 'I'll take it as read. Let me see that paper.'

He read the same account as Bristow was reading, and when he had finished he looked capable of tackling the Museum again.

During the morning Lorna read the story, and her eyes began to dance. She waited anxiously for word from Mannering, and he telephoned just after eleven o'clock.

'I'm all right, sweetheart! I'll see you for lunch. Will you telephone your father and tell him for me to start talking now? Let him say he's going after the *Evening Star*, that the police are a pack of nincompoops, and—well, he can please himself. He should enjoy it.'

'He will.' laughed Lorna.

Some half an hour later Lord and Lady Fauntley faced each other across the table in their suite at the Hotel Metropole. Lucy Fauntley's eyes were gleaming, and Fauntley was looking ready to burst. He could say what he liked, he would teach them to follow him from London, he would teach the *Evening Star,* he . . .

'You look pleased, Hugo dear,' said Lucy. 'I always hate it when you're unhappy, and I thought perhaps you'd done something silly, but I ought to have known better. There. John told you it would be all right, too. Aren't you glad you didn't talk first, now all the other people are in the wrong because the ruby's safe and you didn't lose it?'

'It was ridiculous – absurd!' exclaimed Hugo Fauntley. 'I've never been so insulted in my life, and when that fellow Lynch calls again won't I let him have it! Won't I make the *Evening Star* print its apologies, eh? And, as you

say, dear, if John hadn't warned me not to talk too soon I might have made a fatal mistake. Fatal. Yet . . .' He eyed his wife uncertainly. 'Lucy, this is foolish, I know, but how *did* Mannering know what the Baron was going to do?'

Lucy Fauntley laughed and patted her husband's hand.

'Don't you worry about the Baron any more,' she said. 'He's been a good friend of yours, and if he's a good friend of John what does that matter?'

'A *friend* of John Mannering!' exclaimed Fauntley, as though a new light had been shed on his perplexity. 'Do you know I'd never thought of that? I once wondered if John Mannering *was* the Baron.'

'What an absurd idea!' said Lucy Fauntley.

'Yes,' said Augustus Teevens, 'show him in – yes.'

He sat in his barely furnished office, his moon-face set benignly, but a ferment of anxiety in his mind, Wigham, his chief clerk, opened the door a few moments later, and John Mannering entered, putting his hat and gloves gently on the stockbroker's desk,

'Well, Gus?' he said, and Teevens moistened his lips.

'Well—er—quite a pleasure, Mr. Mannering. Quite a pleasure. I—er—I . . .'

'Can't you get the lies out?' asked Mannering gently.

Then his voice hardened and he leaned forward. 'Listen to me. You tried to get Fauntley blamed for the Irawa Ruby, and you failed. You will always fail when you play tricks with Fauntley or with me or with the Baron. Remember I've enough evidence to send you and your solicitor behind bars for ten years.'

Teevens's little eyes darted furtively to and fro.

'I assure you, Mannering, that . . .'

'You don't have to assure me of anything,' said the Baron. 'Your last chance has gone, Teevens. Don't forget it.'

He collected his hat and gloves from the desk and turned away, without waiting for Wigham to show him out. Teevens saw that broad back and the tall figure, and he shivered, for although Mannering was already out of the door, Teevens remembered the expression in his eyes.

The affair, the Baron told himself as he went downstairs, was finished. He knew a beaten man when he saw one, and Teevens was crushed. The Moore jewels were in Leverson's hands, and the Baron's bank balance was very healthy. Fauntley's law case was not due for some time, and Mannering was thinking of persuading the peer to insist on a public apology and withdrawing the case. Triumph with dignity, the Baron thought, would appeal to Fauntley's self-importance.

He walked from Lombard Street to Piccadilly, and nodded to the commissionaires outside the Elan. He saw Tanker Tring, his faithful shadow, but Tanker was going to have a rest for a while at least. The Baron thought they both deserved a holiday.

Lorna was sitting in the foyer.

Her eyes were bright, her lips warm. She was laughing soon, and Mannering felt as content as he could until the way opened for them to marry.

'I suppose,' Lorna said half-way through the lunch, 'I can't hope the Baron is dead.'

'I doubt it,' smiled Mannering. 'Although he might go abroad for a change. Do you want him to finish?'

'In some ways.'

'Do you want him to?'

Lorna's eyes were smiling into his.

'Well – no.'

'That's fine,' said the Baron, 'that's perfect.'

He told her, later that day, of the part Didcotte had played, and Philippa Grey. It was fitting, therefore, that when they dined at the Elan that night the Didcottes and Philippa Grey should be at another table. Lorna nodded at Mannering's unspoken suggestion. They joined the other party, and young Guy Didcotte stood up eagerly.

'Hallo, Mr. Mannering. Very glad to see you. You introduced us, so you will want to congratulate us.'

'Who and what?' asked Mannering.

'Philippa and me,' said Guy Didcotte, with deep satisfaction, 'on our engagement.'

Mannering called for champagne, and Didcotte smiled in satisfaction. Mary Didcotte told herself yet again that Guy was lucky and wise in his voice of Philippa Grey, while the Baron looked into the eyes first of Philippa Grey and then of Lorna Fauntley, and he told himself that he was well satisfied.

So was Lorna Fauntley.

The danger to the Baron was gone, and even Bill Bristow had given up hope of catching him for anything he had done in the past. The only hope of putting the Baron in a cell was to catch him red-handed, and Bristow was not sanguine about it. Lorna guessed as much.

'You'll take a rest for a while, John?' she asked.

'I think we both deserve it,' smiled Mannering. They were in the drawing-room of the Portland Place house, Lorna deep in an easy chair and Mannering smiling down on her. It seemed fantastic to think that only a few days before he had been hunted and she haunted by the police. 'And we've other things to think about.'

The smile faded from Lorna's face.

There was Rennigan, her husband, and while he lived she could not marry Mannering. It was the inescapable barrier, the thing that always intruded on their happiness and made them realise the vicious circle of their association.

'Yes. But there's nothing we can do, John. We can't trace him without risking trouble, and after this I can't let Mummy and Daddy know.'

'I don't want you to,' said Mannering softly. 'But I am beginning to

wonder whether there isn't another way of dealing with Mr. Rennigan. Shall we start thinking about it?'

'I rarely do anything else!'

'Then we'll start working on it. If ever I find Mr. Rennigan he's going to feel very sorry for himself. Is he in England?'

'I don't know. I've only the address to send the money.'

'We'll find him,' said the Baron. As he bent down and lifted Lorna from the chair, the smile in his eyes and the set of his chin told her that he meant what he said. It also filled her with fresh hope that the shadow of Rennigan would one day be gone.

Series Information

Published or to be published by
House of Stratus

Dates given are those of first publication
Alternative titles in brackets

'The Baron' (47 titles) (writing as Anthony Morton)
'Department 'Z'' (28 titles)
'Dr. Palfrey Novels' (34 titles)
'Gideon of Scotland Yard' (22 titles)
'Inspector West' (43 titles)
'Sexton Blake' (5 titles)
'The Toff' (59 titles)

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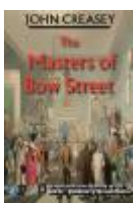

The Masters of Bow Street

This epic novel embraces the story of the Bow Street Runners and the Marine Police, forerunners of the modern police force, who were founded by novelist Henry Fielding in 1748. They were the earliest detective force operating from the courts to enforce the decisions of magistrates. John Creasey's account also gives a fascinating insight into family life of the time and the struggle between crime and justice, and ends with the establishment of the Metropolitan Police after the passing of Peel's Act in 1829.

'The Baron' Series

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Meet the Baron *(The Man in the Blue Mask) (1937)*

2. The Baron Returns *(The Return of the Blue Mask) (1937)*
3. The Baron Again *(Salute Blue Mask) (1938)*
4. The Baron at Bay *(Blue Mask at Bay) (1938)*
5. Alias the Baron *(Alias Blue Mask) (1939)*
6. The Baron at Large *(Challenge Blue Mask!) (1939)*
7. Versus the Baron *(Blue Mask Strikes Again) (1940)*
8. Call for the Baron *(Blue Mask Victorious) (1940)*
9. The Baron Comes Back *(1943)*
10. A Case for the Baron *(1945)*
11. Reward for the Baron *(1945)*
12. Career for the Baron *(1946)*
13. Blood Diamond *(The Baron and the Beggar) (1947)*
14. Blame the Baron *(1948)*
15. A Rope for the Baron *(1948)*
16. Books for the Baron *(1949)*
17. Cry for the Baron *(1950)*
18. Trap the Baron *(1950)*
19. Attack the Baron *(1951)*
20. Shadow the Baron *(1951)*
21. Warn the Baron *(1952)*
22. The Baron Goes East *(1953)*
23. The Baron in France *(1953)*
24. Danger for the Baron *(1953)*
25. The Baron Goes Fast *(1954)*
26. Nest-Egg for the Baron *(Deaf, Dumb and Blonde) (1954)*
27. Help from the Baron *(1955)*
28. Hide the Baron *(1956)*
29. The Double Frame *(Frame the Baron) (1957)*
30. Blood Red *(Red Eye for the Baron) (1958)*
31. If Anything Happens to Hester *(Black for the Baron) (1959)*
32. Salute for the Baron *(1960)*
33. The Baron Branches Out *(A Branch for the Baron) (1961)*
34. The Baron and the Stolen Legacy *(Bad for the Baron) (1962)*
35. A Sword for the Baron *(The Baron and the Mogul Swords) (1963)*
36. The Baron on Board *(The Mask of Sumi) (1964)*
37. The Baron and the Chinese Puzzle *(1964)*
38. Sport for the Baron *(1966)*
39. Affair for the Baron *(1967)*
40. The Baron and the Missing Old Masters *(1968)*
41. The Baron and the Unfinished Portrait *(1969)*
42. Last Laugh for the Baron *(1970)*
43. The Baron Goes A-Buying *(1971)*
44. The Baron and the Arrogant Artist *(1972)*
45. Burgle the Baron *(1973)*
46. The Baron - King Maker *(1975)*
47. Love for the Baron *(1979)*

'Department Z' Novels

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1. The Death Miser *(1932)*
2. Redhead *(1934)*
3. First Came a Murder *(1934)*
4. Death Round the Corner *(1935)*
5. The Mark of the Crescent *(1935)*
6. Thunder in Europe *(1936)*
7. The Terror Trap *(1936)*
8. Carriers of Death *(1937)*
9. Days of Danger *(1937)*
10. Death Stands By *(1938)*
11. Menace! *(1938)*
12. Murder Must Wait *(1939)*
13. Panic! *(1939)*
14. Death by Night *(1940)*
15. The Island of Peril *(1940)*
16. Sabotage *(1941)*
17. Go Away Death *(1941)*
18. The Day of Disaster *(1942)*
19. Prepare for Action *(1942)*
20. No Darker Crime *(1943)*
21. Dark Peril *(1944)*
22. The Peril Ahead *(1946)*
23. The League of Dark Men *(1947)*
24. The Department of Death *(1949)*
25. The Enemy Within *(1950)*
26. Dead or Alive *(1951)*
27. A Kind of Prisoner *(1954)*
28. The Black Spiders *(1957)*

Doctor Palfrey Novels

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Traitor's Doom *(1942)*
2. The Legion of the Lost *(1943)*
3. The Valley of Fear *(The Perilous Country) (1943)*
4. Dangerous Quest *(1944)*
5. Death in the Rising Sun *(1945)*

6. The Hounds of Vengeance *(1945)*
7. Shadow of Doom *(1946)*
8. The House of the Bears *(1946)*
9. Dark Harvest *(1947)*
10. The Wings of Peace *(1948)*
11. The Sons of Satan *(1948)*
12. The Dawn of Darkness *(1949)*
13. The League of Light *(1949)*
14. The Man Who Shook the World *(1950)*
15. The Prophet of Fire *(1951)*
16. The Children of Hate *(The Killers of Innocence; The Children of Despair) (1952)*
17. The Touch of Death *(1954)*
18. The Mists of Fear *(1955)*
19. The Flood *(1956)*
20. The Plague of Silence *(1958)*
21. Dry Spell *(The Drought) (1959)*
22. The Terror *(1962)*
23. The Depths *(1963)*
24. The Sleep *(1964)*
25. The Inferno *(1965)*
26. The Famine *(1967)*
27. The Blight *(1968)*
28. The Oasis *(1970)*
29. The Smog *(1970)*
30. The Unbegotten *(1971)*
31. The Insulators *(1972)*
32. The Voiceless Ones *(1973)*
33. The Thunder-Maker *(1976)*
34. The Whirlwind *(1979)*

Gideon Series

(Writing as JJ Marric)

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Gideon's Day *(Gideon of Scotland Yard) (1955)*
2. Seven Days to Death *(Gideon's Week) (1956)*
3. Gideon's Night *(1957)*
4. A Backwards Jump *(Gideon's Month) (1958)*
5. Thugs and Economies *(Gideon's Staff) (1959)*
6. Gideon Combats Influence *(Gideon's Risk) (1960)*
7. Gideon's Fire *(1961)*

8. A Conference for Assassins *(Gideon's March) (1962)*
9. Travelling Crimes *(Gideon's Ride) (1963)*
10. An Uncivilised Election *(Gideon's Vote) (1964)*
11. Criminal Imports *(Gideon's Lot) (1965)*
12. To Nail a Serial Killer *(Gideon's Badge) (1966)*
13. From Murder to a Cathedral *(Gideon's Wrath) (1967)*
14. Gideon's River *(1968)*
15. Darkness and Confusion *(Gideon's Power) (1969)*
16. Sport, Heat & Scotland Yard *(Gideon's Sport) (1970)*
17. Gideon's Art *(1971)*
18. No Relaxation at Scotland Yard *(Gideon's Men) (1972)*
19. Impartiality Against the Mob *(Gideon's Press) (1973)*
20. Not Hidden by the Fog *(Gideon's Fog) (1975)*
21. Good and Justice *(Gideon's Drive) (1976)*
22. Vigilantes & Biscuits *(Gideon's Force) (1978)*

Inspector West Series

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Inspector West Takes Charge *(1942)*
2. Go Away to Murder *(Inspector West Leaves Town) (1943)*
3. An Apostle of Gloom *(Inspector West At Home) (1944)*
4. Inspector West Regrets *(1945)*
5. Holiday for Inspector West *(1946)*
6. Battle for Inspector West *(1948)*
7. The Case Against Paul Raeburn *(Triumph for Inspector West) (1948)*
8. Inspector West Kicks Off *(Sport for Inspector West) (1949)*
9. Inspector West Alone *(1950)*
10. Inspector West Cries Wolf *(The Creepers) (1950)*
11. The Figure in the Dusk *(A Case for Inspector West) (1951)*
12. The Dissemblers *(Puzzle for Inspector West) (1951)*
13. The Case of the Acid Throwers *(The Blind Spot; Inspector West at Bay) (1952)*
14. Give a Man a Gun *(A Gun for Inspector West) (1953)*
15. Send Inspector West *(1953)*
16. So Young, So Cold, So Fair *(A Beauty for Inspector West; The Beauty Queen Killer) (1954)*
17. Murder Makes Haste *(Inspector West Makes Haste; The Gelignite Gang; Night of the Watchman) (1955)*
18. Murder: One, Two, Three *(Two for Inspector West) (1955)*
19. Death of a Postman *(Parcels for Inspector West) (1956)*
20. Death of an Assassin *(A Prince for Inspector West) (1956)*
21. Hit and Run *(Accident for Inspector West) (1957)*

22. The Trouble at Saxby's *(Find Inspector West; Doorway to Death) (1957)*
23. Murder, London - New York *(1958)*
24. Strike for Death *(The Killing Strike) (1958)*
25. Death of a Racehorse *(1959)*
26. The Case of the Innocent Victims *(1959)*
27. Murder on the Line *(1960)*
28. Death in Cold Print *(1961)*
29. The Scene of the Crime *(1961)*
30. Policeman's Dread *(1962)*
31. Hang the Little Man *(1963)*
32. Look Three Ways at Murder *(1964)*
33. Murder, London - Australia *(1965)*
34. Murder, London - South Africa *(1966)*
35. The Executioners *(1967)*
36. So Young to Burn *(1968)*
37. Murder, London - Miami *(1969)*
38. A Part for a Policeman *(1970)*
39. Alibi for Inspector West *(1971)*
40. A Splinter of Glass *(1972)*
41. The Theft of Magna Carta *(1973)*
42. The Extortioners *(1974)*
43. A Sharp Rise in Crime *(1978)*

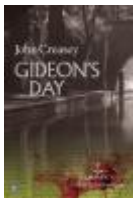
'The Toff' Series

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Introducing the Toff *(It's the Toff!) (1938)*
2. The Toff Goes On *(1939)*
3. The Toff Steps Out *(1939)*
4. Here Comes the Toff *(1940)*
5. The Toff Breaks In *(1940)*
6. Salute the Toff *(1941)*
7. The Toff Proceeds *(1941)*
8. The Toff Goes to Market *(1942)*
9. The Toff Is Back *(1942)*
10. The Toff on the Trail *(short stories) (1942)*
11. The Toff among the Millions *(1943)*
12. Accuse the Toff *(1943)*
13. The Toff and the Deadly Priest *(The Toff and the Curate) (1944)*
14. The Toff and the Great Illusion *(1944)*
15. Feathers for the Toff *(1945)*
16. The Toff and the Lady *(1946)*

17. Poison for the Toff *(The Toff on Ice) (1946)*
18. Hammer the Toff *(1947)*
19. The Toff in Town *(1948)*
20. The Toff Takes Shares *(1948)*
21. The Toff and Old Harry *(1949)*
22. The Toff on Board *(1949)*
23. Fool the Toff *(1950)*
24. Kill the Toff *(1950)*
25. A Knife for the Toff *(1951)*
26. A Mask for the Toff *(The Toff Goes Gay) (1951)*
27. Hunt the Toff *(1952)*
28. Call the Toff *(1953)*
29. The Toff Down Under *(Break the Toff) (1953)*
30. Murder Out of the Past *(short stories) (1953)*
31. The Toff at Camp *(The Toff at Butlins) (1954)*
32. The Toff at the Fair *(1954)*
33. A Six for the Toff *(A Score for the Toff) (1955)*
34. The Toff and the Deep Blue Sea *(1955)*
35. Kiss the Toff *(Make-Up for the Toff) (1956)*
36. The Toff in New York *(1956)*
37. Model for the Toff *(1957)*
38. The Toff on Fire *(1957)*
39. The Toff and the Stolen Tresses *(1958)*
40. Terror for the Toff *(The Toff on the Farm) (1958)*
41. Double for the Toff *(1959)*
42. The Toff and the Runaway Bride *(1959)*
43. A Rocket for the Toff *(1960)*
44. The Toff and the Kidnapped *(The Kidnapped Child) (1960)*
45. Follow the Toff *(1961)*
46. The Toff and the Toughs *(The Toff and the Teds) (1961)*
47. A Doll for the Toff *(1963)*
48. Leave It to the Toff *(1963)*
49. The Toff and the Spider *(1965)*
50. The Toff in Wax *(1966)*
51. A Bundle for the Toff *(1967)*
52. Stars for the Toff *(1968)*
53. The Toff and the Golden Boy *(1969)*
54. The Toff and the Fallen Angels *(1970)*
55. Vote for the Toff *(1971)*
56. The Toff and the Trip-Trip-Triplets *(1972)*
57. The Toff and the Terrified Taxman *(1973)*
58. The Toff and the Sleepy Cowboy *(1975)*
59. The Toff and the Crooked Copper *(1977)*

Select Synopses

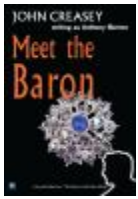


Gideon's Day
Gideon's day is a busy one. He balances family commitments with solving a series of seemingly unrelated crimes from which a plot nonetheless evolves and a mystery is solved. One of the most senior officers within Scotland Yard, George Gideon's crime solving abilities are in the finest traditions of London's world famous police headquarters. His analytical brain and sense of fairness is respected by colleagues and villains alike.

Gideon's Night
On this particular night Commander George Gideon has to deal with a couple of psychopaths who trail pain and blood in their wake. One targets infants, and the other young women on London's foggy streets. There's also an explosive gang war in the offing, and one way or another all of these cases are coming to their breathtaking conclusions at the same time. Can Scotland Yard's finest cope with such a nightmarish scenario, with what would ordinarily be months of time consuming police work crammed into just one night?

Gideon's Fire
Commander George Gideon of Scotland Yard has to deal successively with news of a mass murderer, a depraved maniac, and the deaths of a family in an arson attack on an old building south of the river. This leaves little time for the crisis developing at home . . .

Meet the Baron
John Mannering (*The Baron*) makes

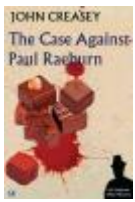


his first appearance in this volume. Lord Fauntley cannot help showing off both his daughter and the security under which his precious jewels are kept. Mannering finds himself attracted to both .... Money is tight and so he plans a burglary, but this fails and unexpected consequnces result. The relationship with Lorna Fauntley flourishes, and a series of high profile thefts and adventures ensure Mannering's future, so he believes, until Lorna equates him with *The Baron*. One of the many further twists in this award winning novel occurs when the police appear to seek Mannering's help, only to have everything turned upside down as the plot develops . . .

Shadow The Baron
John Mannering ('*The Baron*') is called in by Scorland Yard's Superintendent Bristow to help catch the mysterious jewel thief '*The Shadow*'. No one know the thief's identity, but he has managed to pull off many high profile robberies. However, as Mannering proceeds to track down the target, he finds the pursuer becomes the pursued . . . ..

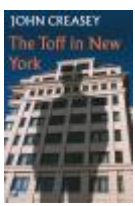
The House of the Bears
Standing alone in the bleak Yorkshire Moors is Sir Rufus Marne's *'House of the Bears'*. Dr. Palfrey is asked to journey there to examine an invalid - whom he finds has disappeared. Moreover, Marne's daughter lies terribly injured after a fall from the minstrel's gallery, which Dr. Palfrey discovers was no accident. He sets out to look into both matters, but the discoveries he makes are truly fantastic. A deserted mine, powerful explosive and a submarine all feature in this powerful mystery. The results are even capable of surprising him ...

Inspector West Takes Charge
Extortion is the name of the game, as one victim after another is ruthlessly targeted. Chief Inspector Roger West must now solve the problem, along with a tangle of murders - but the case becomes more frightening as every minute passes.



The Case Against Paul Raeburn
Chief Inspector Roger West has been watching and waiting for over two years - he is determined to catch Paul Raeburn out. The millionaire racketeer may have made a mistake, following the killing of a small time crook. Can the ace detective triumph over the evil Raeburn in what are very difficult circumstances? This cannot be assumed as not eveything, it would seem, is as simple as it first appears .....

Introducing The Toff
The Toff is the Hon. Richard Rollison; the ultimate sleuth who revels in solving crimes. Whilst returning home across the Essex countryside from a day's cricket at his father's Norfolk home, he happens upon an accident that sets him on a new trail. This involves murder, suspense and thrilling action as The Toff applies his mind with its usual precision and thoroughness.



The Toff in New York
'Say, Miss Hall, I hope that brother of yours hasn't run into any trouble.' But Will Hall had been kidnapped and the Honourable Richard Rollison, known by many by the apt if absurd soubriquet of the *'Toff'* is soon on the scene, but not before a murdered man had fallen into Valerie Hallís arms. There's lots of action in 'millionaire surroundings', with a rich private eye

and the NYPD all on the case, whilst the Toff tracks Dutch Himmy, surely the worst man in New York . . . ..

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